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“Discovering the Kinetic Language of Violence on the Early Modern Stage” addresses the concern that scholars of early modern literature do not frequently historicize sword combat in their analyses of moments of violence. This project seeks to demonstrate the fruitful areas of inquiry that wait to be discovered. In this project, I theorize sword combat as a conversation, employing a variety of other theoretical frameworks to explain the various ways that swords influence our understanding of embodiment. I describe the conversational model of combat as the “kinetic language of violence,” and I locate this conversation in the movements of swordsmen and the historical valences of their weapon choices.

I begin my analysis with a focus on the falchion, a brutal medieval sword that had almost disappeared by the early modern period. Here, I argue that the sword is a “fecund arm” that bridges the gap between the body and the social self. The second chapter examines the way that the ballock dagger, which has a phallic hilt, negotiates gender in *Macbeth*, *The Maid’s Tragedy*, and *Merchant of Venice*. The third chapter understands race as a prosthetic notion that can be troubled and naturalized through swords such as the curtle-ax and the scimitar. I focus on constructions of race in *Tamburlaine I & II*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello*. Finally, I examine the extremely popular rapier in *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Little French Lawyer*, *Othello*, and *The Roaring Girl* to explain how the rapier renegotiates the line between the body and the social self.

DISCOVERING THE KINETIC LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE ON THE EARLY  
MODERN STAGE

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In Phillip Sidney's *Arcadia*, we see a use of the sword that is at once both conventional and noteworthy. Under attack by horsemen, Sidney's Palladius uses his sword as an object of both embodiment and language formation: "But Palladius not accustomed to grant over possession of himself upon such unjust titles, with sword drawn gave them so rude an answer, that divers of them never had breath to reply again."<sup>1</sup> It may be tempting to understand Palladius' answer only as the violent activity he uses his sword to enact, but in the early modern period, this juxtaposition of word and deed was highly conventional. Palladius' "answer" is not only the violent act itself, but the subject position that he occupies by engaging in that act. The "reply" of the enemies can be interpreted as defending themselves from Palladius' onslaught, but Sidney's use of the phrase "breath to reply again" suggests that the attackers have lost an argument as much as a battle. This phrasing seems to blur the line between communication and violent activity, though in truth, such blurriness is highly conventional in the period.

This project argues that the act of physical combat is a kind of conversation between the people involved. Reading violence in this way works against the notion put forward by Elaine Scarry that violence and pain represent the points where language

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1970), G2r. Spellings Modernized.

breaks down. Scarry notes that “as physical pain is monolithically consistent in its assault on language, so the verbal strategies for overcoming that assault are very small in number and reappear consistently... these verbal strategies revolve around the verbal sign of the weapon or what will eventually be called here the language of ‘agency.’”<sup>2</sup> Of course, understanding agency in terms of domination and subjugation has been conventional for years, and work has only recently begun to challenge this idea. Such readings are still prevalent, and they diminish the possibility for alternate forms of agency. In particular, a model such as Scarry’s does not allow agency to those who *lose*, or at least *comply*, with the victor of a fight. Kathryn Schwartz explains that “Acquiescence does not occur in silence. It is a discursive development, which crosses sites of investment and proliferates claims on intent.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, those who engage in violent activity usually do so of their own volition, even if they lose. In some cases, the victim even allows the weapon to enter his or her body – and for these reasons, violence is both discursive and embodied. Scarry’s commonly-accepted understanding of pain takes away the voices of the victims by constructing domination narratives around them. Language is stripped away by the weapon, and pain is reduced to instinctual reactions to the stimulus of the object. The cries of the wounded become inadmissible as evidence of the person’s social self because they are naturalized through talk of nerve endings and corporeal selfhood. Scarry’s argument situates the site of the wound/defeat in opposition to agency/victory, configuring the weapon as the locus of – and terminus for – bodily agency. While some scholars have engaged the notion that the loser of a combat might find a way to prove his

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<sup>2</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Schwartz, *What You Will* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 15.



or her worth by “fighting the good fight,” our notions of combat tend to rely on a judiciary combat model, one which suggests that losing a battle is symptomatic of moral turpitude. Even though we now recognize that physical exertions like those used for a sword fight are built upon years of practice, the very notion that someone who studies can produce victory still carries with it all of the moral judgment associated with students who have “done their homework.” In the early modern period, members of marginalized groups, particularly public performers and thieves, found study under the tutelage of the *escrimeurs* to be a way to renegotiate one’s position in an increasingly capitalist society.<sup>4</sup> For once, study could tangibly improve the student’s lot in life.

The very fact that victory or defeat can serve as evidence of one’s inner worth, however, denaturalizes the notion that pain is the physical component to mental or emotional suffering. Violence, as one vehicle through which pain or death is transmitted, cannot be an entirely physical act if it is capable of serving in an evidentiary capacity. Violence is not an end to itself; rather, violence is to be interpreted and processed. In this sense, violence becomes profoundly social, despite its need to be instantiated through the body. Violence is digestible through language, and language is digestible through violence. For this reason, I hold that violence is a form of language production. I have named the conversation that happens when two warriors engage in combat the “kinetic language of violence,” and consider it reciprocally inscribed in the language that describes sword combat, the semiotic functions of the sword itself, and the act of violence

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Turner and Tony Soper, *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1990), 3.

being described. Because violence is an ideal vehicle through which embodiment and selfhood speak to one another, the kinetic language of violence, when it is evident, challenges medicalized notions of the body even as it renegotiates what constitutes language.

Early modern drama is particularly useful for investigating the kinetic language of violence because the violence was visible onstage, and because playwrights consistently code switch between it and the English language. What this code switching shows is that the violence is in many ways a subtext of the English language itself. The kinetic language of violence opens a variety of possibilities for scholars working with violence in early modern drama. In particular, most readings of violence on the early modern stage have turned to sexualized interpretations based in psychoanalysis. While many of these readings have provided fruitful information for scholars' with sword combat, the extreme prevalence of such readings has shut out many of the other possibilities.<sup>5</sup> By now, many scholars see psychosexual readings of violence as the default. Patricia A. Cahill, for instance, asserts that "I find psychoanalytic theories of trauma to be invaluable in approaching the Elizabethan martial repertory."<sup>6</sup> Cahill's work, in particular, relies on the figuration of wounds as sexual in nature. This project is not a polemic against sexualized readings of violence; rather, it will texture such readings, bringing in a variety of other

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<sup>5</sup> In the aggregate, this project directly answers Adolph Soens' call-to-arms (issued in his 1969 article "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing") for scholars to more deeply interrogate the meanings conveyed in the moment of combat. Over all, Soens' call remains unanswered, with the notable example of Joan Ozark Holmer ("Draw if you be Men"). I perceive that Soens' historicized approach to violence is in many ways the road-not-taken; it was around the same time that Freudian readings gained preeminence in the field.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia A. Cahill. *Unto the Breach*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

theoretical constructs to discuss the polyvalent nature of the kinetic language of violence. Relying too heavily on sexual models to describe violence has an unintended consequence. Because sexual models generally rely on a domination/submission paradigm, sexual readings of violence situate sex as violent in and of itself, while elevating violent acts to the level of biological imperative. In addition to limiting the ascription of agency to acts of domination, this type of thinking holds serious, albeit unintended, consequences for communities that have not traditionally been privy to these forms of agency. Reading violence in such a biological framework naturalizes the power relations that uphold aggressive models of agency. Women racial minorities, and sexual minorities are robbed of interiority in models that characterize them as dominated when those models insist upon exerting or resisting domination as the key to agency. When applied, Scarry's model of violence can emphasize a corrosion of language, but the model itself is subversively social in nature.

The weapon troubles clear divisions between physical body and social self by engaging both the language and the body from subject *and* object positions. The sword is an "armament," and therefore *of* the body at the same time it is a "tool" to be held *by* the body. Similarly, the sword can offer a "reply" to an assault, even when that reply is at the expense of spoken words. In the mimetic valences of sword combat, the division between the physical body and the inward person can be collapsed, revealing the corporal insides of the body as well as the socialized, moralized righteousness – or lack thereof – of the warrior. In a sense, the sword is a tool for opening bodies in much the way that interrogation is meant to reveal verbal truth. Because we have distanced ourselves from

the sword training necessary to interpret it, the kinetic language of violence has lost some of its force in the modern day. Today we frequently see a division between words and deeds; our heroes punctuate acts of violence with the “one-liner” rejoinder, a trend that suggests words commence only when violence is reaching its conclusion, outlining a kind of reverse discourse.<sup>7</sup> In early modern drama, conversely, we see acts of violence used rhetorically. Consider the assassination of Julius Caesar, after which the assailants lave their hands in the victim’s blood before strutting into the marketplace. Marc Antony eulogizes Caesar’s wounds as “dumb mouths,” (III.i.260)<sup>8</sup> another construction that makes the violence seem more like a continuation of the ongoing discussions than a cessation. Opening wounds in this instance becomes a way of trying to reveal a kind of dialogue; the mouths appear dumb to Caesar’s mourning friend because the body is dead, but the conversation still begs to take place. Antony imagines the furtherance of this conversation, however, as a martial one. Though the mouths “beg the voice and utterance of my [Antony’s] tongue,” (III.i.261) the utterance Antony imagines is that Rome “Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war” (III.i.273). Even a death wound becomes the prompt for further discussion when the line between language and violence is blurred. The violence against Caesar seeks to end a discussion about empire, but Antony’s rhetorical prowess transmutes the gashes in Caesar’s stomach into warmongering mouths.

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<sup>7</sup> My favorite example can be found in *Die Hard* (1988). The terrorists at odds with the hero, John McClane, suggest that he is trying to be a cowboy by fighting with them. When he decides to fight back, he responds, “Yippee kai-yay, mother fucker.” The line is particularly illuminating because McClane uses the line poetically; it rhymes with the insult levied against him for his (ostensibly) needless violence while punctuating the act of violence itself. Its place in the script could be compared to the *volta* in a sonnet format; it signals a turn from words to deeds in much the way I have been describing. Early modern dramatists are more frequently interested in using fights as a continuation of the conversations that surround them, as this project will show.

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare. *The Arden Shakespeare: Julius Caesar* (London: Cengage Learning, 1998).

## The Sword in Context

The most important step in our attempt to refine our understanding of the relationship between violence, agency, and embodiment is historicizing sword combat training. The sword is the right choice of weapon to investigate because the early modern period saw growing divisions between the aristocracy and the lower classes that were negotiated over the place of the sword in society. The notion of personality over efficiency, highlighted in the differences between firearms and bladed weapons, exemplifies the way that people used to privilege individuality and skill over community and teamwork. It is clear that warfare was, for the English nobility, mostly indistinguishable from dueling.<sup>9</sup> Rather than actually contributing in a significant way to the outcome of battle, nobles sought personal honor through engagements with their rivals. Such contacts were more personalized than the pike formations and firing lines of arquebusiers<sup>10</sup> that defined the period for the lower classes, allowing warriors to distinguish themselves through skillful blade work. Because duels were defined by vendettas and posturing, they were almost never integral to the overall outcome of battles. We may understand this notion of personality over tactical supremacy as the negotiation of one's voice within the kinetic language of violence.

During the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, the sword found itself at the center of a cultural shift, one which would see the rise of the merchant class and an intensified emphasis on the products of self-actualization over the reification of one's place in his or

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<sup>9</sup> Roger B. Manning. *Swordsmen: The Martial Ethos in the Three Kingdoms*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 71.

<sup>10</sup> The arquebus was an early precursor to the modern rifle.

her family tree. Because of its use against large bodies of soldiers, the expensive black powder harquebus, wielded predominantly by lower-class warriors, downplayed the need for assay— which tested the opponent’s individual value – and heightened the mathematical drive of modern warfare. The near-invisible balls were meant to thin the ranks, rather than eliminate specific targets. Cahill cites a new emphasis on mathematics as a military paradigm shift at work in the period.<sup>11</sup> We see that paradigm shift come under fire in *Othello*, when Iago decries Michael Cassio’s numerical proclivities as “a great arithmetician” (I.i.18).<sup>12</sup>

The disconnect between the weapon’s owner and its target enabled a higher death rate among the lower classes. Consider, for instance, the messenger at the beginning of *Much Ado About Nothing*, who is pleased to report that the casualties are “But few of any sort, and none of name” (I.i.4). This division between the faceless masses and the individualistic aristocracy would become ever-more codified; by the end of the seventeenth century, aristocrats accused of cowardice might expect to be forced to carry a musket (the next evolution of the harquebus and the blunderbuss) beside their own soldiers as a form of punishment.<sup>13</sup> On one side, being in the ranks made one more vulnerable, but – perhaps more importantly – it also stripped the nobleman of his opportunity to elevate his individual honor. He lost his personhood in the crowd; the intimate connection with his opponents – and the opportunity for conversational combat – disintegrated in the face of rank-and-file anonymity.

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<sup>11</sup> Cahill, *Into the Breach*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, (London: Cengage, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Manning, *Swordsmen*, 63.

In this political and cultural world, the sword was the item that separated the warrior from the farmer. The sword, as a symbol of the class divisions in England, became a contested object. Chivalry depended on a system that required the sword to be passed down from generation to generation, rather than the Classical model of citizen-soldiers. By Roman standards, based on figures such as Cincinnatus, the goal of the soldier was to finish a war so that he or she could return to the job of farming. In the sword-based chivalric structure, however, the warrior never relinquishes his sword. The sword can situate a person's social rank within chivalric culture, but it also is the tool by which the warrior defines that rank. As Roger Manning explains, the social dynamic at work here simultaneously offers one a spot in the social hierarchy and (in the model of knight-errantry) highlights the preeminence of the individual over royal domination.<sup>14</sup>

In the early medieval period, the sword served as a symbol for home-grown virility and *noblesse oblige*. Maurice Keen explains that, from the beginning, the bestowal of armaments to a warrior was a rite of passage. As far back as the Anglo-Saxon period, receiving a sword empowered a soldier to serve the crown and fight in the name of the monarchy. The receipt of this sword was a bestowal of agency and placement in the social order. As chivalry evolved in England, giving a sword to a member of the nobility became synonymous with knighting him. This connection held special sway in the Arthurian tradition: "to receive knighthood from a lord of particular standing associated the recipient with that lord's honor and dignity. That is the idea that informs the repeated anxiety of the young aspirants of romance to receive knighthood at the hands

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<sup>14</sup> Manning, *Swordsmen*, 46.

of King Arthur.”<sup>15</sup> Agency becomes a received personality trait, rather than something that one claims. This division of classes, characterized by who has a say in the way society functions, became the gold standard by which a person’s agency was acknowledged in the medieval period, but by the early modern period, such divisions were blurring in the light of emerging capitalism. When a father passed on his titles, lands, and armaments to his firstborn, social authority remained located in a handful of families. Just as a sword would pass from one family member to another, primogeniture defined chivalric warrior culture by presenting the opportunity to direct the flow of social agency through a process of inheritance – in no small part due to the martial nature of the knightly class. In the early modern period, anxieties surrounding the bourgeois threatened the place of the sword. Doubts connected to the veracity of class divisions began in the medieval period, and these doubts became increasingly evident on the early modern battlefield as the structures designed to allay them were challenged by changes in technology and economics. No matter how well-trained, a swordsman cannot stop a wall of pikes or a cloud of mass-produced projectiles using his sword, and this ability of the middle- and lower-class soldiers to overcome the knighted gentry on the battlefield from a position of safety threatened not only the class structure, but the going definition of English masculine autonomy.<sup>16</sup>

Sword-based agency narratives were one of many ways in which the aristocracy attempted to distance itself from the lower classes. King Arthur stands as an obvious

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<sup>15</sup> Maurice Keen. *Chivalry*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Roger Manning refers to this phenomenon as the “warrior crisis of the sixteenth century.” Manning, *Swordsmen*, 134.



example of this particular valence of the sword; his receipt of Excalibur is what marks him as worthy to rule. In the early modern period, the Arthur legend played a huge role in the emerging nation state's need for a mythical history. Henry VII named his first son after King Arthur, in hopes that he might reify the Tudor claims that they were descended from the mythical king. The narrative became so central that the family baptized the newborn prince in Winchester Cathedral, supposed seat of government in Camelot.<sup>17</sup> Richard Helgerson sees the Arthur legend's appropriation by Spenser in *The Faerie Queen* as a convenient way to distance the political valences of Englishness from the mob. Arthur's quest for Excalibur highlights royal (and, to a lesser degree, aristocratic) martial autonomy, as opposed to the collectivist attitudes of the *hoi poloi*.<sup>18</sup> Other examples of the sword providing a link to native Englishness exist in the period. For instance, the indigenous Britons (pre-Saxon, Christianized natives of the island) were supposed to center their lives around the sword. When Thomas Harriot likens the natives of Virginia to the Britons, he reveals that the only piece of clothing worn by male Britons was a metal belt that served the function of hanging a sword.<sup>19</sup> The very name of the Saxons derives, historically, from their swords, called a seaxe.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the sword became a symbol a more-purified Englishness.

This historical narrative provided Englishmen with a crisis of definition regarding the semiotic function of the sword. On one hand, the sword was everywhere, as the

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Doran. *The Tudor Chronicles*. (New York: Metro Books, 2008), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Helgerson. *Forms of Nationhood*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Harriot. *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1972) 77.

<sup>20</sup> "Saxon." OED, accessed December 1, 2014.

innovation of French and Italian rapiers allowed a gentleman about town the opportunity to defend himself with a lightweight, easily transported weapon that focused on precision and grace, rather than the brute force and aggression prized by the past nobility. Duels were so popular during the early modern period that a plethora of tracts denouncing street violence soon followed the arrival of the continental weapon.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the sword's function as a weapon of war had become largely displaced by the late fifteenth century. The falchion, once a brutal sidearm of medieval warriors, found a new home in the hunt. Hale says that the centrality of the sword was nearly lost in the early modern period, as lances and pikes became the staple weapons of armies throughout Europe.<sup>22</sup> Manning further explains that the only reason swords remained on the battlefield at all had to do with the aristocracy's need for self-definition through personal combat, as described above. Meanwhile, the inefficient harquebus and the immense cannon began to supplant ranged weaponry like the crossbow and trebuchet, despite the extreme expense of producing and firing them.<sup>23</sup> Caught between the longer range of the various staves in the period and the shock value of explosive gunpowder, the sword was in danger of disappearing from English military culture – and the process by which Englishmen defined themselves became embattled. This impending disappearance became a source of anxiety for an emerging English nation state that required a deep connection to its past as a function of its imperial agenda. Despite the decline of the sword's prevalent battlefield

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<sup>21</sup> See Jennifer Low, *Manhood and the Duel*.

<sup>22</sup> J. R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450-1620*. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1985) 204-206.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas F. Arnold, *The Renaissance at War*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) 52.

application, the English aristocracy began to find other uses for the sword, as the marker of Arthur and the prized possession of the Britons.

We might see the intentional use of an outdated weapon as a form of identity-making. As the sword migrated from the battlefield to the street and the halls of government, rather than fulfilling its original role in war, it became a symbolic object, like a plume, a badge, or a garter. In this context, we see that the practical use of swords on the battlefield was on the decline, and while the sword itself remained as lethal as ever, its ceremonial use as a marker of identity became more prominent. Notable among such ceremonial applications were the seven-to-eight foot long bearing swords commissioned by Henry VIII for royal processions.<sup>24</sup> In many ways, the sword became prolific in everyday life even as historical forces slowly pushed it away from its original place on the field of battle.<sup>25</sup>

### A Question of Experience

As swords became everyday objects, the vocabulary of the swordsman began to intermingle with English speech. We are now the inheritors of this vocabulary of sword combat – a kinetic language of violence that inflects our language formation and shapes our culture. For instance, the phrase “get to the point” is derived from the Italian phrase *alla stocatta*, which is analogous to the French *en garde*. When we ask someone to “get to the point,” we are inviting him or her to conclude the conversation, but syntactically,

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<sup>24</sup> “Two hand Bearing Sword, probably an English royal processional sword,” *Royal Armouries*, Accessed 23 November, 2014, <http://www.royalarmouries.org/line-of-kings/line-of-kings-objects/single-object/310>

<sup>25</sup> Even the lower classes gained access to the sword, though the *type* of sword became important to the still-present class divisions. The curtle ax became a popularly derided sword for its associations with town watchmen.

we place ourselves in an aggressive position relative to his or hers. Similarly, when we refer to giving someone “the slip,” we are actually citing a fencing maneuver that takes the duelist’s body offline from the incoming attack, implying that our unwanted company may have been dangerous.

Given the prevalence of such examples of martial figures of speech, it would seem likely that editors of early modern literature would dedicate attention to these turns of phrase in their textual apparatuses. Surprisingly, sword combat gets very little investigation from most editors; footnotes range from the vaguely descriptive to the outright cryptic. For instance, consider the fencing references that Mercutio makes in *Romeo and Juliet*. Mercutio and Benvolio playfully practice fencing maneuvers, including the “immortal *passado*, the *punto reverso*, the *hai*” (II.iii.22-23). The most recent edition of *The Norton Shakespeare* explains the meaning of the terms as “Italian fencing terms for a lunging sword thrust, backhanded thrust, and thrust that reaches through,”<sup>26</sup> hardly a clear note. The Arden edition, usually the most performance-oriented of edited Shakespeare texts, gives more thorough notes, but the notes are incorrect. Problematically, Weis cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* for his definitions, though as he points out, the dictionary’s “first mentions” of the phrases are the play itself. These oddly self-reflexive definitions cause the footnotes to be inaccurate. Consider the following: “*passado* a thrust while stepping forward; the *OED* cites this line, but attributes the first English usage to Saviolo’s manual (‘You may with much suddenness

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<sup>26</sup> Greenblatt, et al. *The Norton Shakespeare*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008) 930.

make a *passata* with your left foot'; see 23n)."<sup>27</sup> While Weis has taken the time to give a thorough footnote and to look up the source text, he inaccurately describes the maneuver as a thrust. A thrust involves a lunge, coupled with a stabbing motion of the sword, which requires a full commitment – and full hazard – of the body. Meanwhile, the *passata* does not employ the sword; a *passata* is footwork – taking a step. Elsewhere in Saviolo's text, the master directly forbids the combination of attacks with *passate* in many circumstances: "take heed you strike neither with your Rapier nor Dagger, if you mean to enter upon him with a *passata*, because he having once gained ground of you both opportunity of time and measure of ground, you endanger yourself very much."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the term "hay," which the *Norton* editors cryptically define as "a thrust that reaches through," and which Weis explains as a "home-thrust,"<sup>29</sup> is actually not a fencing term at all. As Joan Ozark Holmer responsibly explains, "It does not appear in Saviolo's text because it is not a fencing term but rather an attack cry or exclamation."<sup>30</sup> This is the kind of editorial oversight that can produce ahistorical readings of early modern play texts. Such readings can modify our understanding of characters and – in many cases, even our understanding of the plot.

While the point might seem like the kind of academic minutiae that would normally be unworthy of critical attention, this particular footnote results in an incomplete characterization of Benvolio and Mercutio, something I explain in more detail

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<sup>27</sup> René Weis. *The Arden Shakespeare: Romeo & Juliet*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010) 210.

<sup>28</sup> Sig. I3r.

<sup>29</sup> Weis, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 210.

<sup>30</sup> Holmer, "'Draw, if you be Men': Saviolo's Significance for Romeo and Juliet," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45.2 (1994) 167, accessed March 13, 2013.

in Chapter Quarte. Most scholars consider their deaths to be a natural risk incurred when the young men participate in a dangerous game, but understanding the terms Shakespeare uses can help us recognize that the duelists are at best indirectly aware of the threat to their persons; they are taking more precautions than risks in the fights, and seem to think it is a game. This instance shows us the consequences of having a weapon that also serves symbolic purposes. The tragedy of the play results, in many ways, from their failure to recognize the consequences of the duelists' actions until it is too late. Excluding the nonexistent "hay," the other two maneuvers Benvolio and Mercutio use are more defensive in nature than a thrust. Saviolo explicitly defines the *punta riversa* as an attack that allows the swordsman to hazard the opponent while staying under a strong ward.<sup>31</sup> The *passata*, a step, can carry one either toward or away from combat, but does not have to correspond to an attack. Meanwhile, the thrust (again, not actually in this list) places the fencer "in great danger to be hit on the face."<sup>32</sup> It is understandable that Weis has confused the terms; Saviolo notoriously mixes his vocabulary with everyday English. In this instance, Saviolo sometimes uses the term "thrust" to refer to a full lunge, while other times, he uses the word as a verb to describe delivering other types of moves, such as *stoccate*.<sup>33</sup> The footnote misleadingly treats the street fights in Verona as serious duels. Shakespeare's list suggests, conversely, that the duelists do not really expect death to result from their brawls. The one aggressive maneuver in the list comes from a place of

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<sup>31</sup> sig. N3r.

<sup>32</sup> sig. 3v.

<sup>33</sup> By way of example, Saviolo distinguishes between the *staccata* and the thrust more often than not ("You may give him a stoccata or thrust" – sig. G2r), but when he uses "thrust" as a verb, he appears to be using it more colloquially ("I would thrust a stoccata to his belly" – sig. 1r.)

strong defense, and the “hay” is, as I have explained, just a loud noise.<sup>34</sup> Earlier, Benvolio describes Tybalt’s similarly nonlethal brandishing of the sword, known in fencing terms as a *moulinet*:

He swung about his head and cut the winds  
Who, nothing hurt withal, hissed him in scorn (I.i.109-110).

When Mercutio dies under Romeo’s arm, then, the death should not come as an expected result of dangerous play; the audience and/or the readers who know the terminology of the sword should be surprised at the death; at no point in the play before now have the duelists behaved as though they are taking the fight seriously. They are engaging in swordplay, with an emphasis on “play.” A more thorough reading of the swords in early modern texts will ask readers to rethink the relationship between actions and the actual consequences that ensue from them. It further provides evidence of the conversational nature of combat, texturing our understanding of violence away from the kill-or-be-killed model usually accepted by scholars without question.

While several scholars in the field have an interest in sword combat, the highly technical descriptions of critics such as Adolph Soens and Joan Ozark Holmer might put off the majority of less-interested parties. Other than clarifying the use of a specific term or phrase, one might ask, what is the value of knowing the difference between a *mandritti* and a *moulinet*? Similarly, the vast majority of criticism related to sword combat, like that of Jennifer Low, tends to place a premium on the behaviors of the swordsman before or

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<sup>34</sup> There is sound and fury, but it signifies nothing.

after combat, rather than the minute details of the sword-in-motion. Knowing the codes and manners of the fencing scene in the period does not necessitate any specialized knowledge of the swords-as-objects because such analyses do not need to make productive use of it. Naturally, this kind of scholarship is useful, but it interrogates the reasons for combat without translating the act of combat itself. To make a working distinction, the moral codes invested in rationalizing combat are not written in the same language as combat itself. What I want to argue, however, is that the language spoken in combat was widely known to the aristocratic audience, that it was easily legible to a large portion of the observers in the playhouse, and that it is necessary in many plays to fully understanding the characters and the plot. Most scholars would see the value in translating the foreign language passages of plays like *Henry V* or *The Spanish Tragedy*; I hope to show that moments of combat require similar – and often equally important – acts of translation.

Part of the reason so little attention has been paid to the fights in early modern drama no doubt stems from the amount of work it takes to reconstruct a fight scene from an Elizabethan / Jacobean play. Generally, printed editions are unhelpful in this arena; consider, for instance, two examples of fights from Shakespeare plays. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the climactic fight scene between Romeo and Tybalt is ushered in with little ado: “*They fight, Tybalt falls.*” (III.i.133b) The competition between Hamlet and Laertes demonstrates a similar paucity of descriptors, which is particularly interesting considering that the majority of the scene *is* a duel. While the characters bicker about what was or was not a hit, the actual wound occurs in authorial silence:



Laer. Have at you now.      [*Laertes wounds Hamlet; then,*] *in scuffling, they*  
  *change rapiers.*      (V.ii.304-306)<sup>35</sup>

Even in the climactic scene of the play, in which the entire plot revolves around a duel, the conversations revolve around “hit” or “nothing,” while the stage directions require editorial assistance to clear up even the most important details (e.g. Hamlet’s death-wound).

The immediate reaction of many scholars in these instances is to supply the causal explanations to which I alluded earlier. While many scholars have found fruitful inquiry into the *causes* and *rationale* behind combat in the early modern period, most discussions of the actual physical mechanics of stage combat have overlooked the kinetic language of violence. The closest most scholars come to using the technical aspects of sword fighting to connect to larger themes appears in psychoanalytical readings. The field as a whole readily accepts such sexual readings of combat, asserting that violence done with a blade is (almost always) sexual in nature. Consider, for instance, Marjorie Garber's highly popular (with good reason) text, *Shakespeare After All*, which has this to say about the posturing between Capulet and Montague in *Romeo and Juliet*: "Lady Capulet is clearly casting doubt on her husband's martial – and perhaps his marital – swordsmanship. In this play as in so many others of the period a capacity to handle one's sword is – hundreds of years before Freud – seen as a sign of manliness."<sup>36</sup> While Garber focuses on the details about the weapons described in the play, she – like many scholars – flattens

<sup>35</sup> The *Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet* edition I cite here uses Q2.

<sup>36</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 191.

the importance of the weapons as semiotic tools by reading combat as primarily sexual in nature. I am not interested in challenging Freudian readings *per se*. Certainly, there is fruitful ground to cover in reading combat as sexual in nature, as decades of scholarship have demonstrated. Joseph Swetnam, noted misogynist and one of the most accomplished swordsmen of the period, certainly associates sword length with phallic giftedness: “Let thy rapier be of a reasonable length, rather too long than too short, four foot at the least, except thine enemy do give or send thee the length of his weapon; then it is a point of manhood to match him as near as thou canst.”<sup>37</sup> This project in no way attempts to refute readings of the plays that take these sexual innuendos into account. That said, observing the sword’s ability to penetrate the body, then asserting the penetrative act as a sexual conquest, ignores most of the actions taken within individual fights, let alone a variety of alternate interpretations of violent acts.

There are real-world consequences to reading sword violence as sexual in nature, as well. There are implications behind this sort of reading of sword combat that can be dangerous. They can potentially reinforce many of the prejudices that most scholars would prefer to fight against, particularly homophobic commonplaces and misogynistic attitudes toward heterosexual intercourse. To paraphrase and edit a colloquial joke about Freud, sometimes a sword is just a sword. The problem with reading all sword fights as sexual intercourse is not *only* that it limits the scholar’s toolbox and shuts down the possibility for a variety of other readings. To read sexuality into every sword fight is to

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<sup>37</sup> Joseph Swetnam. *The School of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defence* (London: Bodleian Library, 2014), 8.

position violence as interchangeable with sex. Sword combat is violent and destructive, there is often a winner and a loser, and it often has important extra-combative consequences for the participants (death being one of them). To tie this interaction directly to sex is to make a variety of assumptions about the act of sex itself. It assumes that sex is violent, that intercourse requires a “dominant” and “submissive” partner (the winner of the fight and the loser, respectively), and as I have already examined, that it outlines the terminus of discourse and agency. Furthermore, mercy, which in most sword fights is the ideal result, becomes an act of abstaining from intercourse in such a formulation. One might do well to consider the connections between such assumptions in terms of rape culture and the possible implications for members of sexual minorities.<sup>38</sup>

By no means do I wish to suggest that scholars are directly appropriating or approving of a discourse of violent sexuality, but by reading all sword fights as sexually charged, they create an all-encompassing parallel between violence and sex. If sex and violence are always connected to one another, there can exist no opportunity for loving, gentle modes of sexuality. Furthermore, if we operate under an assumption that sexuality is always

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<sup>38</sup> While such combats can be multivalent in terms of gender and sexuality, the fact that most early modern combats take place between men requires a certain degree of caution when one appropriates a violent paradigm for sexuality. A preexisting discourse around homosexual intercourse as inherently violent has its roots in the period. Alan Bray has noted that a mistranslation in the King James Version of the Bible highlights this prejudice: “Their translation is revealing... they translated by a mere description, albeit a description coloured by their disapproval: ‘abusers of themselves with mankind’.” (13). The longstanding tradition that sex between two men constitutes a form of mutual abuse then collides with Freudian readings of violence that want to reinforce the sexual components of violence. Dave Grossman comments: “Yet the procreative act and the destructive act are inextricably interlinked. Much of the attraction to the killing process, and much of the resistance to close-in killing, revolves around the vicious side of ourselves that would pervert sex in such a manner that we *can* conceive of such things.” (134). The notion that sex *is* violent, coupled with the assertion that wartime violence represents a perversion of sexuality, compounded by the prevalence of males in the average military, produces a highly prejudicial picture of male sexuality.

violent, we might be inclined to elevate violence to the level of biological imperative.<sup>39</sup> In what follows, I examine various alternative readings of violence, using literary critical theory to rethink sexually charged violence in the context of disability, gender, race, and sexuality.

Focusing on the kinetic language of violence decentralizes the need to sexualize violence, opening a variety of alternative models for understanding combat. Consider, for instance, the starting place that such readings must adopt. Jennifer Low historicizes the notion of the loser of a duel as “not only the passive, permeable woman but also with her alternative, the immature male.”<sup>40</sup> Several assumptions about sex are present here, including an implication of pederasty and the belief that there must be a passive partner at all. Low is reiterating early modern commonplaces about combat in her reading, and she trenchantly demonstrates how these gendered notions work in the texts under examination, but the argument itself still requires a certain amount of preconception, which I hope to problematize. We might reconceive combat as a conversation, perhaps even an experiment, meant to root out authority and truth when spoken words are inadequate to do the job – a construction that appears regularly in early modern dramatic texts.<sup>41</sup> My goal here is to decentralize the prevalence of a univalent reading of violence,

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<sup>39</sup> The danger of such thought might seem overstated, but consider the policy of mutually-assured-destruction prevalent during the Cold War. The possibility of positioning violence as a fact of life not only enables the military-industrial complex to justify its continued existence in our own culture, it offers a variety of excuses for violence – it is a self-enabling system that becomes all-encompassing because it has created an “unquestionable” justification for its existence. Noam Chomsky has outlined this process much better than I could here in texts such as *Counter-Revolutionary Violence*.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Low, *Masculinity and the Duel*, 71.

<sup>41</sup> Again, Manning is helpful here: “...many materialists assume that honor disputes could not be adjudicated by gownsmen, but only settled by trial on the field of honor where the language of the sword spoke more eloquently than lawyer’s arguments.” *Swordsmen*, 222.

and to expose the necessary assumptions a scholar risks in adopting such readings without employing other modes of translation.

### The “White Arm” and Embodiment

As with sexualized readings of the sword, the physical nature of sword combat emphasizes slippages between the physical and social selves. It stands to reason, then, that as England’s increasingly imperialist model required the reconstruction and assimilation of subjugated bodies that the sword, with its close ties to the body, would likewise become a site of anxiety. Changing definitions of embodiment would inform changing definitions of the sword, and *vice versa*. The sword affected the way a person walked, interacted, and reacted with the world.<sup>42</sup> Every male with the means to do so was expected to learn sword use as a means of protecting himself and his family. The sword therefore became the tissue maintaining the safety of the family unit while simultaneously representing a kind of ever-negotiated Englishness that connected the past and present. Because of the sword’s newly pervasive place in society, the technical lexicon of the swordsman slowly insinuated itself into a position of privilege among the metaphors and idioms of English speech.

What I am suggesting is that the actions taken in a stage fight signify in much the same way as words. If literary criticism operates under the belief that words derive power from their semiotic function, then the relative critical silence toward stage combat terminology represents an omission in our scholarship regarding the semiotic power of

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<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Low, *Manhood and the Duel*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 43.

those references. Given their prevalence, it is clear to me that early modern playwrights saw the value in employing these terms; otherwise, they would not use them so regularly (often, quite casually). Like the written word, the mimetic act of stage combat is composed, like a pen to a page, with the bodies of actors and the weapon itself. The syntax of combat is written in maneuvers and grunts. The vocabulary is a polyglot language known to those who trained in sword combat. This project will be invested in translating the kinetic language of violence into a form that is legible to the average critic.

If violence serves the discursive function that I claim it does, we should be able to “read” acts of stage combat in the same way that we “read” the other languages present in these texts. This project will investigate the social prejudices that the sword engages in an attempt to highlight how our theories, aimed at traditional English words, can apply to the kinetic language of violence just as seamlessly. Doing so will serve two functions. First, these readings will serve as proof of concept that the kinetic language of violence exists; if it is, indeed, a language, it will bear scrutiny as traditional linguistic analysis does. Second, and perhaps more importantly, by engaging in different theoretical modes, I hope to highlight how the kinetic language of violence can inform the efforts of other scholars. The work I do here is more exemplary than comprehensive – and the goal is to issue a call-to-arms for my colleagues that I hope will demonstrate the benefits of paying attention to this aspect of early modern culture – one that has long been taken for granted.

I have structured the chapters that follow to highlight different ways that literary critics might employ the kinetic language of violence in their readings. Each chapter

engages a different critical theory. I start with disability studies because it offers the best avenue to understanding the place the sword occupies between the body and the social self; it is from this chapter that my theoretical framework develops. I then move to gender studies because gender bears the clearest similarities to disability in the way that society employs it. I move from gender to race to engage with emerging notions of race as a type of prosthetic, as it becomes clear that the kinetic language of violence highlights the similarities between the three constructs. Finally, I tie all three theoretical structures together in the final chapter, employing them together to offer a more-holistic model for others to follow. In the interest of highlighting the connections between sword combat and language, I have named the following chapters after the four major fencing wards. Wards are the defensive “resting” positions in which a sword is held during combat.

Chapter Prime: “Naked to the Deadly Stroke – The Falchion and Disability in *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*” explores physical impairments and the falchion. A machete-like medieval sword, the falchion was always less historically prevalent than the equivalent knightly swords of the period. Interestingly, Shakespeare arms Richard, Duke of Gloucester with a falchion in *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*. Given Shakespeare’s representation of Richard as a physically deformed, murderous monster, choosing an obscure weapon like the falchion might seem random, but the choice is far from perfunctory. I argue that the falchion is a weapon that is less effective than similar knightly swords, which offers an increased likelihood for maiming, rather than killing, the target. As Marcela Kostihová points out, “Shakespeare’s text, while forceful in its demonization of Richard’s body and soul, is surprisingly ambiguous in describing the

physical nature of Richard's deformity."<sup>43</sup> This chapter uses the falchion in order to highlight the way that disability strides a carefully-balanced line between performativity and biology.

Chapter Seconde: "Either for Fighting or for Drudging" – The Dagger and the Appropriation of Manhood engages notions of gender and class. The dagger was particularly prevalent in the period; it was a necessary tool at mealtime,<sup>44</sup> but it also served a defensive purpose in rapier duels. I focus on the most common dagger in the period, the ballock dagger, which was shaped like a phallus, and therefore can be useful to us because it directly engages the way that even explicitly pubic weapons can lend themselves to a nuanced reading through the kinetic language of violence. I investigate the valences of the daggers wielded by Juliet and Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Macbeth and his wife in *Macbeth*, and Evadne in *The Maid's Tragedy* to suggest that masculine agency was not always explicitly tied to offensive behavior. Each text offers a different, but related, insight into the gendering of the weapons. The dagger's phallic shape comes dangerously close to tying violence to biological sex, yet can still help us nuance our ideas about agency, biological determinism, and free will.

Chapter Tierce: "There sits imperious Death, keeping his circuit by the slicing edge" – Sabres and the Shadow of Saladin on the Early Modern Stage addresses the ways in which sabres played a vital role in early modern performance of race. This chapter

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<sup>43</sup> Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, eds. *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 136.

<sup>44</sup> See Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.



examines the way that early modern playwrights often subverted the Islamophobia present in the early modern imagination. Because the scimitar was the iconic weapon of the Mameluke, slave-warrior cavalymen who repelled Christian armies in the Crusades, the sabre could have easily become a marker of difference for characters who stand in opposition to traditional European warrior ethos and are identified as unfettered, undisciplined Moors. Examining Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, as well as Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* duology, I explore the ways in which the two playwrights rely on the sabre to subvert early modern prejudices against Moorish others. As Lara Bovilsky points out, "Renaissance racial vocabulary presents interpretive difficulties, first of all, because names and categories of racial groups are unstable."<sup>45</sup> I demonstrate one of the fissures at which that destabilization occurs – through the kinetic language of violence.

Finally, as the most heavily documented weapons in early modern England, rapiers could fill a book on their own. In Chapter Quarte: "Apish Toys" – Rapiers in the Playhouse, the rapier serves as a "blended" topic. In contrast to the topically-focused chapters that precede it, this chapter demonstrates that reading the kinetic language of violence is not a proscriptive endeavor. To ensure that the formulaic nature of the three previous chapters does not falsely imply that swords have a one-to-one correlation with various prejudices, this chapter instead focuses on each of the critical frameworks from the previous three, combining them with Katharine Maus' theories on interiority to discuss alternate ways that swords might engage with the line between the body and the self. Employing the early modern commonplace that the rapier was a weapon of

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<sup>45</sup> Lara Bovilsky. *Barbarous Play*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 14.

“subtlety,”<sup>46</sup> this chapter uses the changeable valences of rapiers as evidence that the weapon served many semiotic functions in the period. I start by engaging with racialized readings of *Othello*, a topic that ends Chapter Tierce, to show how our modern notions of race have influenced everything from our social realities to the way we stage Jacobean dramas. With *Romeo and Juliet*, I explore the ethnically-charged implications of rapiers as they relate to English nationalism. I then turn to the gendered valences of *The Roaring Girl*, exploring how a focus on weaponry can add nuance to readings of scholastically problematic texts. Finally, I use *The Little French Lawyer* as evidence that disability narratives can take a variety of different tenors when the sword appears, despite the kinetic realities of sword use.

The discovery of the kinetic language of violence hinges upon an understanding that swords were intrinsic to early modern aristocratic life. The recognition of the embattled line between the body and the self, which the sword occupied, is a recognition of the tension created when early modern writers attempted to process and codify their place in the world. The body has long been a discursive, constantly-reconstructed site of selfhood, and objects such as swords that alter the body must, by their nature, participate in that discursive model. It follows, then, that we must re-discover the kinetic language of violence in order to attain a more-nuanced understanding of the ways in which embodiment is proscribed. Because the sword was as closely linked to selfhood as it was to embodiment, it offers us a unique insight into how the two notions were negotiated at a point in time when the division between them became viciously embattled. As a result of

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<sup>46</sup> *The Roaring Girl*, II. 112-114.

this phenomenon, we can work to denaturalize many of the social discourses that attempt to process the line between the body and the self.

CHAPTER PRIME: “NAKED TO THE DEADLY STROKE” – THE FALCHION AND  
DISABILITY IN 3 *HENRY VI* AND *RICHARD III*

## CHAPTER II

### THE FALCHION AND DISABILITY IN 3 *HENRY VI* AND *RICHARD III*

Oh, "Strange!" I wondered,  
They were a hundred,  
Yet I routed them with few blows.  
This Falchion by my side, has killed more men – I'll swear it –  
Than Ajax ever did. Alas, he ne'er came near it! (III.4-8)<sup>47</sup>

The quote above, from a sixteenth-century ballad by Charles Gustavis, gives us an idea of how falchions were viewed in the early modern period. The falchion resembled a modern machete, with a sword's hilt instead of a utilitarian handle. The weapon was brutal – indicated by the "few blows" directed at indeterminate numbers. The falchion directly descended from the sax, a weapon hailing from the Norse regions, and the namesake of the Saxons.<sup>48</sup> By around 1560, however, the falchion existed on the battlefield only in insignificant numbers,<sup>49</sup> primarily because the weapon was inefficient against human targets with better swords. Archers and lightly armored infantry soldiers had been the most common falchion users, but these soldier types were on the decline by the early modern period.<sup>50</sup> Falchions were always used as secondary weapons in battle

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Gustavis, *The Lamentation of a Bad Market: Or, The Disbanded Soldier* (London: n.p., 1660). <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/home>, 66. Spellings and punctuation modernized.

<sup>48</sup> Ewart Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armor* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 152.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>50</sup> Harvey J.S. Withers and Tobias Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History of Knives, Swords, Spears & Daggers* (China: Hermes House, 2013), 497.

anyway, but their short, maneuverable blades made them perfect tools for hunting. As the weapon lost traction on the battlefield, it found itself in the hands of nobles by the fourteenth century, who began adding a saw blade to the false edge for the purpose of skinning animals.<sup>51</sup> The saw-backing on the weapon was sometimes known as a “garniture,” or alternately as a “trousse.”<sup>52</sup> When Shakespeare gives a hunting weapon like the falchion to his infamous villain, Richard III, in the first tetralogy, he does so to cast Richard as a predatory character. The meaning of Richard’s falchion has become less clear over the years; the sword has frequently evaded the attention of most early modern critics. In his study of the swords found in Shakespeare’s history plays, Charles Edelman suggests that “it is impossible to say with certainty which weapons Burbage [as Richard] and his opponent used,”<sup>53</sup> despite the fact that Richard and Edward regularly draw attention to their falchions. Because Richard is at the center of an ongoing scholarly discussion about disability, then, we must recognize the historical connection between the falchion and disability. The fact that the falchion frequently breaks and severs limbs is significant in context because Richard uses the tool to dismember or impair his opponents. The messy, often-nonlethal cuts delivered by this sword are capable of redefining the limitations of both the user’s and the victim’s bodies, demonstrating people’s ability to arbitrate embodiment in themselves and others. Similarly, the fact that the falchion was historically used to dress the bodies of slain animals redefines Richard

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 286-288.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Edelman, *Brawl Ridiculous* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 86.

as an apex predator in the play. Richard dresses his enemies' bodies like he might dress deer, highlighting his unchallenged control over embodiment in the plays.

Richard's connection to this sword hinges on a distinction, made by Allison Hobgood and David Wood, between "impairment," meaning the physical lack of a normative characteristic (missing limbs, the inability to see) and "disability," meaning the social process that "creat[es] barriers to access."<sup>54</sup> The interplay between these distinctions is important to our understanding of Richard, then, because his scoliosis and halting gait invite us to read him as disabled, but in truth, the extent to which Richard is actually disabled is less clear in the plays than we usually assume. Richard's abilities far exceed those of characters who surround him, and, as I shall argue, this hyper-ability is enhanced by the fact that his disability makes him unassuming in the eyes of other characters. Because the falchion emphasizes the use of cuts, which remove sections of limbs, it specializes in redefining the limitations of both the user's and the victim's bodies. Richard's ability to enter his opponents' physical space with the sword, then leave while removing a hand or a head, highlights the constructed nature of the limitations of the body. Richard's arm can extend beyond proscribed bounds at the same time as it shortens the limits of others' bodies. We can see in this exchange that people are capable of arbitrating embodiment in themselves and others. Richard uses the falchion to redefine the character of his body; his halting gait becomes a swagger, and his scoliotic back becomes a symbol of his sexual desirability when read through the kinetic

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<sup>54</sup> Hobgood & Wood, "Introduction," in *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, eds. Allison Hobgood & David Houston Wood, 5.

language of violence. Meanwhile, he uses the falchion to truncate the bodies of others, limiting their ability to contain him and redefining the terms under which society operates. Richard uses others' view of him as disabled in order to hide behind a curtain of sympathy. He employs the falchion to make other bodies more impaired than his own, creating disabilities in those who stand between him and the throne in order to gain power. Richard self-describes as "curtailed of this fair proportion" (I.i.18) even as he physically reconstructs his enemies' bodies with a weapon that specializes in dismembering and marring the human form. In short, the falchion serves Richard as a tool by which he equalizes his disabilities with the abilities of others. He uses his rhetorical prowess to reinforce the disability narratives that hamper his rise to power, then creates disabilities in others in order to supplant them. Because of its ability to extend the capacities of one body and its proclivity to truncate the abilities of another, the falchion shows us that disabled bodies can trouble medicalized naturalism and performance as tools for expressing identity. The sword highlights a third space between the body and the social self, one that is at once both physical and discursive, which allows its user to extend his or her own body in order to redefine the limits of others.

It is at the intersection between the body and the self that we can see the value of the kinetic language of violence. Because we define disability, the act of definition is reliant upon language. As I argue in the introduction, violence constitutes a language of its own, and the unique quality of this language is that it is capable, unlike the spoken word, of creating impairments, which often result in socialized disability. To understand disability as discursive is to understand it as a social construct – even when the sword



creates impairment, it is the conversational nature of combat that attempts to define that impairment as disability. To cut off a hand is to remove it, and it is the discourse surrounding this missing member that in turn creates disability. In other words, the sword creates impairment; the words describing impairment create disability. Furthermore, the sword's destructive capacity becomes similarly discursive in these moments. If the sword fight becomes a measure of the participants' worth,<sup>55</sup> then the ability to reshape and diminish the body's dimensions becomes the quintessential arbiter of embodied humanity. Those who lose a limb in a sword fight are forced to seek replacement, if they survive, and this in turn makes the sword a highly discursive object. It empowers one person (and as I shall show, that empowerment is figured as an extension of their personality) to curtail another person's body, not only settling the question of their "worth" (i.e. the honor duel), but making future challenges to the victor's bodily completion even harder. Creating the impairment (and/or subsequent disability) helps the swordsman ensure the future stability of his own body by disabling those who might threaten it.<sup>56</sup> In this chapter, I engage with the emerging field of disability studies to show how Shakespeare categorizes disability in *Henry VI, Part 3* and *Richard III*, and how the kinetic language of violence can help us to problematize some of the theoretical implications of that research.

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<sup>55</sup> See Jennifer Feather, *The Pen and the Sword*, for a discussion of the "assay" phenomenon.

<sup>56</sup> I shall return to the disabled former swordsman in the fourth chapter, when I discuss Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Little French Lawyer*. For a quick example of this notion now, we might look toward Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which the king discusses his inability to stop the hangmen: "I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion / I would have made him skip. I am old now / And these same crosses spoil me." (V.iii.274-276) Here, we see Lear creating a dichotomy between the young, healthy, virile youth-as-swordsman and the disability that comes with old age.

## Reading the Falchion

Representations of falchion warfare are more often than not extremely brutal, no doubt due to the weapon's function as a backup – an encore for violent interactions that have already begun. For instance, Antonio del Pollaiuolo's 1470 engraving, *Battle of the Nudes*,<sup>57</sup> expressly represents the weapon as a brutal tool used by primitive, naked men. Other warriors in the image employ Danish axes, a weapon satirized by Gerald of Wales around 1188 as the tool of the brutal Irish,<sup>58</sup> and composite bows (Eastern bows that were often associated with Moors).<sup>59</sup> The up-close nature of the combat in such images usually highlights the desperation with which the falchion is drawn. For an archer, for instance, a falchion comes out of its sheath when the arrow supply is exhausted or the bow is somehow damaged. Of note for the purposes of this chapter, ultimately, is the fact that almost all of the falchion maneuvers described in the medieval manuals<sup>60</sup> are specifically designed to break or sever bones and threaten facial mauling, but unlike many other weapons, they place significantly less emphasis on the actual killing. Even the writers of combat manuals do not expect the weapon to be efficient at killing, settling instead for wounding (presumably with the plan to finish the job after delivering the wound).

The belief that the falchion was brutal is not simply a classist assumption placed on the lower orders of archers and country knights who used them, however. The *Codex Wallernstein*, a collection of shorter fifteenth-century fight manuals compiled by the

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<sup>57</sup> "Antonio del Pollaiuolo's Battle of the Nudes" *The Cleveland Museum of Art*, last modified 2016, <http://www.clevelandart.org/>

<sup>58</sup> Gerald of Wales, *History and Topography of Ireland* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 107.

<sup>59</sup> See *Titus Andronicus* for a running theme on Moorish weaponry.

<sup>60</sup> Because the falchion was a hunting tool in the early modern period, no fight manuals exist.

German fight master Paulus Hector Mair, offers some insight into the perception of brutality ascribed to this weapon.<sup>61</sup> While the falchion section of this manual is rather short, the few pages dedicated to the weapon generally focus not on chopping at the opponent with the blade, but rather describe defensive maneuvers meant to avert attacks while breaking bones or maiming the face. For instance, basic cuts are to be parried, then the warrior should “go quickly forward with your left foot and hit him with the pommel in his arm... so that you strike him on his head.”<sup>62</sup> The pommel, or apple, is the bulge at the back of the hilt, and is not-insignificantly the etymological origin of the word “pummel.” The maneuver described here would cause the sword to bounce forward from the enemy’s arm, which in turn would shove the blade into his head. Another maneuver forces an enemy to attack, using the falchion to cut his hand off with the momentum of his own swing.<sup>63</sup> Still another maneuver explains how the falchion user can catch their opponent’s incoming blade and use the leverage of the opposing weapon to pry their pommel through the radius and ulna.<sup>64</sup> A similar maneuver can be applied to parry high attacks and tear at the neck.<sup>65</sup> We can understand the reliance on the enemy’s arms and neck as a source of leverage to be a symptom of the incredibly close quarters combat expected of the falchion’s users. In this way, we see that the weapon was very direct, but not particularly humane. For comparison, consider the “cleaner” attacks offered by the thinner, straighter English short sword. George Silver (1599) offers a variety of similar

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<sup>61</sup> As I have mentioned above, the falchion was not a battlefield weapon by the early modern period, so my discussion of the weapon focuses on medieval combat manuals. If early modern manuals regarding falchions ever existed, none are extant.

<sup>62</sup> Grzegorz Zabinski and Bartłomiej Walczak, *Codex Wallernstein* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 2002), 124.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

responses to attack, but rather than bouncing the sword from muscles and violently removing hands, he recommends going straight for the kill: “uncross and strike him on either the right or left side of the head, and fly out instantly.”<sup>66</sup> When given the option of disabling the sword arm, Silver recommends a maneuver that leaves at least a possibility of healing. Rather than cutting off the hand, he has his student “Wrape in his hand and sword under your Arme... and endanger the breaking of his Arme.”<sup>67</sup> Even this maneuver, which would no doubt offer new levels of pain, is tame when compared the falchion’s use as a crowbar, as it breaks the humerus (as opposed to both the radius and ulna) and does not require spiking a pommel through the muscle and skin. In addition, Silver’s use of the term “offer” suggests that there is room for mercy – cutting off the hand gives the opponent no opportunity to save the bones through surrender.

Shakespeare never loses sight of the brutal nature of falchion combat in *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*. Both Edward and Richard carry falchions, and they use them to devastating effect. Generally, it takes more than one strike to kill. For instance, York praises his sons’ valor by describing the battle:

And full as oft came Edward to my side,  
With purple falchion painted to the hilt  
In blood of those that had encountered him. (3.I.iv.11-13)<sup>68</sup>

The description may remind us of the opening scene, in which the brothers, fresh from the battle, show up with trophies from their encounters. Edward has cleft Buckingham’s

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<sup>66</sup> George Silver, *Master of Defence: The Works of George Silver* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 2003), 273.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>68</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI Part 3* (London: Methuen, 2001).

helmet, and offers the proof with his bloody blade: “That this is true, father, behold his blood” (3.I.i.13). The blood on the blade is an emblem of the gore Edward has caused with it, and the commixture of so many nobles’ blood metaphorizes the death-dealing potential of the weapon; this is neither a clean death, nor an easy one.

That said, the excess of blood on the blade suggests that the kills required multiple strokes. The cleaner kills offered by other medieval weapons would still produce plenty of blood, but soaking the sword would require spending time in the opponents’ bodies. Even the manuals describe more ways to maim than to kill, and while maiming an opponent would neutralize him long enough to finish him off, such brutality would have been cruel. In a video meant to demonstrate the effectiveness of the medieval falchion, Kevin Hicks uses one against a pig’s carcass. Expecting extensive and lethal damage, Hicks discovers that, in practice, the sword breaks the pig’s bones and leaves dents in the hide, but only with a difficult thrust does any significant damage. He revises his assertion of the weapon’s lethality by explaining that it would “hamstring you at the very least.”<sup>69</sup> The fact that the weapon was unreliable for executing quick, merciful deaths may explain to some degree why the falchion disappeared from the battlefields, but remained in use during the hunt. The difficulty in delivering humane deaths made the weapon unattractive for use against humans, but animals presented no such quandaries. It is significant, then, that Richard of Gloucester, the most prominently disabled character in Shakespeare, carries such a weapon. Richard’s ability to arbitrate disability, much like that of the falchion itself, is a key factor in his rise to power.

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<sup>69</sup> Kevin Hicks, “The Falchion – Medieval Weapons,” YouTube video, 6:07, posted by “Definition Media,” January 11, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nv7Zz-WdXUc>.

## Prosthesis and Disability

It may seem intuitive for us, in our attempt to read disability through the sword, to assume that the sword works much like a prosthetic arm. Unfortunately, this reading does not work in the case of Shakespeare's Richard because he does not use the falchion as a kind of prosthesis. For David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "prosthesis seeks to accomplish an illusion. A body deemed lacking, nonfunctional, or inappropriately functional needs compensation, and prosthesis helps to effect this end... The judgment that a mechanism is faulty is already profoundly social."<sup>70</sup> In this sense, a prosthesis is an object intended to compensate for a *lack*, and that lack is socially predicated upon the tentative premise of a "normal" body. As they put it, "a textual prosthesis alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view."<sup>71</sup> David Wood and Allison Hobgood explain that the physical realities of the world lend themselves toward compulsory able-bodiedness, figuring the disabled body as "insufficient."<sup>72</sup> It is important that we understand the sword as something other than prosthesis in the case of Richard, because his scoliosis invites us to read him as disabled, but Shakespeare reacts to our expectations by making his character self-aware enough to recognize those presumptions and react to them.

Indeed, Richard himself invites the audience to read disability in his impairment, but his actions undermine such a reading. His famous speech at the beginning of *Richard*

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<sup>70</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Hobgood and Wood, "Introduction," 3.

*III*, in which he self-defines as “Deformed, unfinished... scarce half made up... lamely, unfashionably” (1.i.20, 21, 22) has played no small part in our modern scholarly understanding of Richard’s body – and, by extension, Richard’s disability. The fact that “dogs bark at me as I halt by them” (1.i.23) is not insignificant, but as I shall show, Richard uses his wiles to turn his halting gait into a powerful swagger. As Catherine E. Doubler asserts, range of motion was tied to wholeness in the period; some notions of disability emerged as a feminine instantiation of limited motion. “In order for an early modern individual to maintain his masculinity,” she explains, “he has to maintain the illusion of bodily and subjective layers that are difficult to penetrate.”<sup>73</sup> The early modern period saw two competing notions of masculinity under negotiation, and the hot-blooded, bearded man of medieval ideals was being overcome by the cold, impenetrably muscular one. Doubler explains that this muscularity was not universally considered ideal; medically, there is a surprising counter-narrative that suggests exercise can be unhealthy. The body gets deformed, even corrupted, through too much exercise, and as Doubler explains, this notion is a “proto-ableist” figuration that would eventually lead to one of our modern narratives about disability.<sup>74</sup> Her analysis of Will Kemp’s Falstaff, for instance, suggests that one could interpret a counter narrative of masculinity that hinged upon *imperfection*, rather than *hyper-perfection*.<sup>75</sup>

Understanding disability as performative allows us to consider the context of Richard’s halting gait and “crooked” back. Sujata Iyengar, for instance, reads Richard’s

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<sup>73</sup> Catherine E. Doubler, “‘Gambol Faculties’ and ‘Halting Bravery’: Falstaff, Will Kemp, and Impaired Masculinity” in *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. Sujata Iyengar, 143.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-147.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

gait as a power-hungry “sway.”<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, Allison Hobgood warns us that “By supposing Richard physically able-bodied and only narratively crafted as deformed so as to sustain Tudor legend or to embody the medieval Vice tradition properly... we have authorized the notion of disability foremost as metaphor, and perpetuated the discursive legacy of stigmatic correspondence between monstrous exteriority and immoral interiority.”<sup>77</sup> Richard seems uniquely tuned to this phenomenon, furthermore, as he uses the metaphorical valences of disability to his advantage. Hobgood explains that any attempt to read Richard’s (or anyone’s) body in a metaphorical way makes the actual body invisible.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, while Richard asserts his own disability, citing barking dogs and unkind Natural forces for his problems, within the context of the play, we very rarely see his disability as having sprung from his impairments. He accomplishes almost every task he attempts, and is met with very little resistance. As Geoffrey A. Johns explains, Richard’s deftness challenges his own disability narrative and helps him outperform his peers, who rely on the way that the body signifies moral turpitude, causing them to fail where he succeeds.<sup>79</sup>

While most scholars argue for placing disability in either the physical (embodied) world or the world of the self (the metaphorical and spiritual realm), the falchion allows us to look at both worlds because the sword itself occupies a third space between the two. Because the sword is both an “arm” and an addition to the arm, it changes the

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<sup>76</sup> Iyengar, “Introduction” in *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. Sujata Iyengar, 11.

<sup>77</sup> Allison Hobgood, in *Shakespearean Body*, 26.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>79</sup> Geoffrey A. Johns, “A ‘Grievous Burthen’: *Richard III* and the Legacy of Monstrous Birth” in *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. Sujata Iyengar, 42-43.



construction of the body. The liminal space occupied by the sword allows us to negotiate between the two contrasting models of disability. For instance, Roy Porter insists that the use of metaphor and story is integral to self-definition. Porter points out that his model contradicts that of Susan Sontag, who asserts that it is necessary for us to access disability through a real-world lens, rejecting metaphor.<sup>80</sup> The impulse to metaphorize the body, particularly in areas where the body deviates from Classical models of normalcy, becomes problematic because it limits and moralizes upon the natural variations in human bodily experience. On the other hand, however, fixating on biological realities of the body do not remove value judgments based on “correctness,” they simply locate them in biological corporeality rather than moralism. Too much reliance on a medical understanding of disability creates an intellectual problem, one that Stephen Greenblatt describes as “a fascination with particular, distinctive bodily customs and a fascination with the universal meanings that are disclosed in those same customs.”<sup>81</sup> Part of the problem with medicalizing – and ultimately naturalizing – disability in the period is that medical science was closely linked to religious practice, and while the division between the spiritual and the corporeal had begun in the period, it was not a clean break. The “sixteenth and seventeenth centuries... saw the beginning of a gradual shift away from the axis of sacred and demonic and toward an axis of natural and unnatural.”<sup>82</sup> It is that naturalization that creates many of the difficulties in reading disability as a construct; the term “nature” implies a universality which, as I have explained above, is just as

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<sup>80</sup> Iyengar, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>81</sup> Greenblatt, “Mutilation and Meaning” in *The Body in Parts*, eds. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, 229.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231.

metaphorical as the religious perspective. Naturalism often hides, beneath the label of empiricism, a complex series of its own metaphors. If we focus on disability as a performative instantiation of selfhood, much like gender and race, but refuse to extinguish completely the metaphorical valences attached to those performances, we can begin to discern a middle ground between moralism and nature. In Shakespeare's play, the falchion negotiates this line for Richard.

Recognizing the presence of both metaphor and corporeal reality allows us to negotiate both sides of the complexities of disability. We can directly see this tension in Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III* by investigating the kinetic language of violence through the falchion. As Iyengar points out:

To be 'disabled' in Shakespeare is to experience a physical, moral, or economic slowdown, but the word is rarely used as a participial adjective or to connote a pre-existing or unchangeable tragic condition; instead, the verbal form clarifies disability as a temporary state conferred upon one by another's – or by one's own – actions or prejudice.<sup>83</sup>

What we see in the characterization of Shakespeare's Richard III is the instantiation of Iyengar's model, but with a twist. Richard understands disability as an action, rather than a state of being. He learns this lesson so well that he is able, rhetorically and physically, to redefine his own impairments as strengths which, like the falchion itself, extend the body and increase Richard's capabilities. Richard uses the falchion as a tool known for the removal of limbs and the redefinition of bodily wholeness, as the weapon's "lopping" power allows him to restrict the access of his enemies, both socially and physically.

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<sup>83</sup> Iyengar, "Introduction," 9.

Enabled by the falchion's messy kills, this capacity for arbitrating disability becomes the means by which Richard ascends to the throne.

Because Richard's body does not conform to normative standards of bodily wholeness, we might choose to read the falchion – and swords in general – as a type of prosthesis, but this sort of reading does not bear fruit in early modern plays. While swords are consistently called arms, and become in many texts metonymous with the physical arm, swords extend the normative boundaries of the body, offering to their users a mechanical advantage in combat. In classical Greek models of the body (the models employed in the early modern period as a function of Humanism), however, the normative body relies on symmetry and containment, while the addition of a sword to a person's hand changes the length of an arm and changes the profile of the user and undoes the symmetrical body. The important distinction, then, is that the weapon changes the person's body, but it does so in a way that gives him or her more capabilities than an unarmed opponent. In Bakhtinian terms, it is the grotesque body that over-reaches our understanding of its limits; it has too much of something, rather than too little. The grotesque body is that which "fecundates and is fecundated."<sup>84</sup> Richard's body is dangerous not because it lacks that which others have; it is frightening because he overachieves beyond the capacities of others. Iyengar argues that "while persons might be born with or acquire through illness or accident particular impairments, society alone creates disability."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, we may construe the falchion as something that modifies the body to the point of impairment, but rather than *disabling* the user, it *enables* him or

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<sup>84</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 319.

<sup>85</sup> Sujata Iyengar, "Introduction," 2.

her to do more than his or her body is usually capable of doing without it. In the period, soldiers were praised for their martial prowess, and since the addition of weaponry is not represented as overcoming a lack, we must recognize it as something other than prosthesis. There is no doubt that the sword serves as an extension of the bodily arm, but it is also held in the arm. When Richard invokes the “bruised arms” (I.i.6) of war at the beginning of *Richard III*, it is the haziness between bodily apparatus and tool that allows us to understand the early modern construct of deformity. Psychoanalytical readings of prostheses have demonstrated that adding mechanical parts to human bodies creates what Patricia Cahill cites as “an implicit anxiety that an artificial limb has the capacity to transform the ‘impotent and lame’ body to which it is attached into someone strangely unassailable.”<sup>86</sup> Within this framework is implied a proscribed size and a proscribed shape for the body. The leg’s replacement with a wooden prosthetic becomes a return to completion, and in Cahill’s reading, the completion becomes uncomfortable because the leg is not flesh.

Rather than call swords “prosthetic arms,” however, I shall borrow Bakhtin’s terminology and refer to them as “fecund arms.” In the case of the fecund arm we must understand the metallic addition as *overcompensation*, rather than returning to normativity. The body is implied to be complete before the sword is added, and so the weapon gives the body *more than* its naturalized allotment of matter. This surplus removes the body from normative parameters, and, whether this extra material is seen as

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<sup>86</sup> Patricia Cahill, *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 192.

an improvement or a detriment, it is socially constructed. The problem is still one of bodily difference, but the paradigm differs because increasing the body's capabilities frequently seems more acceptable in an early modern context than replacing a lack. This extra material is interesting in a study of Richard because his back, much like the sword, is considered "extra" material, but is not treated with the same level of acceptance. Cahill sees the early modern suspicion toward the *wounded* warrior as one that is invested in a discomfoting duality: "Attached to an inanimate object imagined to move of its own accord [such as a wooden leg], the body of the lame soldier emerges, at least momentarily, as like that of the not-quite-human wound-man with his many extra parts."<sup>87</sup> We may see the interpretation of Richard's back in a similar light. The play consistently shows his back to be extra material. However, prostheses are not "extra" parts; they are "replacement" parts. The fecund arm, meanwhile, *does* represent an excess, but the excess it provides allows the body to overcome the natural limitations of a proscribed whole. The sword can protect against the truncation of limbs (it is a weapon of defense), and it can collect the body parts of others (as we shall see with Richard).

In this sense, the sword becomes a tool for the definition of selfhood. Extending the capacity of a body likewise defines that body's previous limitations. More than that, the sword's ability to cut or sever the flesh of an opponent creates an inorganic limb that represents aspects of a person's character and invades, truncates, pierces, or otherwise imposes itself upon the bodies of others. The piercing aspect of the sword has led many to analyze the sword as a phallus, but such a reading promotes a violent model of

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<sup>87</sup> Cahill, *Unto the Breach*, 193.

sexuality (or a sexual model of violence) that reinforces preexisting prejudices. Rather, the sword-as-object represents a wide variety of body and personality traits which, put in conversation with the opponent through the kinetic language of violence, is expected to distinguish the warriors based on their worth.<sup>88</sup>

Two problems arise in the above configuration. First of all, if we are to use the idea of a “normal” body as a definitional structure, all people are disabled to some degree – no one has a perfectly “normal” body – but we socially privilege some variations over others.<sup>89</sup> What we now think of as able-bodiedness, for instance, has historically been seen as a drawback; Christian teachings, by way of example, “subordinated both mental and physical health to moral soundness. Sightedness, for example, could restrict

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<sup>88</sup> A modern day example can help clarify the distinction between a bodily addition that *adds to* a person’s capabilities, rather than simply overcoming a perceived lack. In 2012, a controversy arose regarding the London Olympic Games. Oscar Pistorius, a runner from South Africa, qualified to compete in the 400-meter race and the 4x400-meter relay events. Pistorius, critics began to argue, should not be allowed to compete because he was equipped with a pair of Flex-Foot Cheetah prosthetic legs. A study published in 2007 argued that Pistorius’ legs allowed him to conserve 25% more energy when running than runners competing on biological limbs. The argument went that the mechanical advantage supplied by Pistorius’ legs allowed him an extreme advantage over other runners, which in turn made the competition unfair. The argument was overturned in time, and Pistorius earned his chance to go to the event. Ultimately, Pistorius competed, but did not place, in the Olympics. Pistorius’ example gives us a good framework for understanding the non-prosthetic nature of swords in the texts under discussion in this chapter. We might call Pistorius “impaired,” in that he does not have the bottom portions of his biological legs, but we cannot call him “disabled” because his prosthetic legs allow him to run at a similarly competitive level to other runners – and better than many supposedly “able-bodied” people. The prosthetic nature of the Flex-Foot Cheetah legs resides in their ability to compensate for Pistorius’ biological feet. The critics of Pistorius’ ability to compete, however, were arguing that the Flex-Foot Cheetahs gave Pistorius more-than-normative running abilities, which in the model I am using would take the legs beyond the point of prosthesis and into the realm of hyperextending the normative body model. The fear Pistorius’ detractors describe is a fear of “fecund” legs, not of “prosthetic” ones. The ableist implication in such a fear is that other runners might choose to replace their biological legs with such prosthetics to make them “more” able, though such a prejudice is patently self-defeating.

Rose Eveleth, “Should Oscar Pistorius’s Prosthetic Legs Disqualify Him from the Olympics?,” *Scientific American*, last modified July 24, 2012, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/scientists-debate-oscar-pistorius-prosthetic-legs-disqualify-him-olympics/>

<sup>89</sup> Iyengar, “Introduction,” 3.

insight.”<sup>90</sup> Recognizing the historicized nature of the body, and by extension, the socially constructed nature of disability, brings us to our second point of difficulty. The sword is not a prosthesis because it over-extends the expected boundaries of the normative body. Because the sword is an enhancement over the normative body, it offers a useful vein of study regarding our understanding of disability. If we understand the weapon as a “fecund arm” rather than a “prosthetic arm,” we recognize that the grotesque body, in Bakhtinian terms, is a reproductive one. All swords, but particularly weapons like the falchion (with its limb-removing capacities), enable one person with a non-normative body to mold other, more-normative bodies away from the hypothetical, standard configuration. This chapter will now focus on two aspects of Shakespeare’s plays. First, I shall demonstrate how Richard relies upon a sense that his body is disabled while simultaneously using his bodily impairments to advance himself to the throne. This allows us to understand the slipperiness between impairment and disability. Second, I shall explain how adding a falchion to an already hyper-powerful body allows Richard to curtail other, more “complete” bodies in his bid for power, fashioning himself as the very animals other characters use to insult him and becoming in effect a “wolf” among “the harmless sheep” (3.V.vi.7, 8). Doing so further allows us to see Richard as a super powered animal, rather than a mere man.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 5.

## Bruised Arms Hung Up For Monuments

Richard starts *Richard III* with a candid speech outlining his plans for achieving the English throne. Here, in Richard's dismissive rant about the evanescence of peace, we see an exceptional use of *antitheton*: "Our bruised arms hung up for monuments" (I.i.6). The opposition of arms and monuments is crucial for understanding the complexities of Richard's falchion. On one hand, we may read the line as a recognition of peacetime sobriety: the English can now hang up their broken swords *in memoriam* of the war. In this context, the bruises of the arms become poetic reflections of their service in the wars, and as a result, we can understand them to serve metonymically as honorable artifacts of past battles. They become the metaphors of a violent past. On the other hand, however, we may be tempted to remember Richard's behavior in the *Henry VI* plays, which we might sum up as "gleefully dismembering" his enemies. Consider, for instance, Richard's assertion that, just as he has made a puppet out of Somerset's head, so too he hopes to "shake King Henry's head" (3.I.i.20). In this sense, Richard may be referencing not the weapons, but rather actual, bruised human arms, many of which he personally maimed. I suggest that this is a bloody-minded pun of Shakespeare's, and that we cannot be sure what Richard is referring to precisely because of his characterization. If the bruised arm is a well-worn falchion, then Richard has rescinded his ability to lop off heads, hands, and so forth. If the bruised arm is a meaty trophy, the body becomes a site of veneration, much like Catholic relics, but one in which Richard can pay homage to his violent past (a past that is, perhaps, not over). Before the exhumation of Richard's body in 2012, members of the Richard III Society were claiming that Richard's military



accomplishments in battle were proof of his physically normative body.<sup>91</sup> In the play, at least, Richard's facility is in "employing apparent liabilities as weaponry."<sup>92</sup> To hang up his bruised arms becomes an act of attention-direction. The dangers of the battles he has passed become the tools he needs to achieve his goals.

The fact that Richard arms himself with a falchion might likewise lead us to interpret his choice of weapon as an effort to accommodate for his arm, described in *Richard III* as a "blasted sapling withered up" (III.iv.68). The use of the usual knightly longsword or broadsword would require two hands, as demonstrated in Hans Talhoffer's influential combat manual.<sup>93</sup> The one-handed falchion might, in that context, be a kind of prosthetic sword in that it allows Richard to fight like his brothers without the necessary-for-leverage second arm. Such a reading is problematic, however, because Richard's brother, Edward, also uses a falchion. Instead, we can understand the weapon through the kinetic language of violence as one that reduces the normative bodies of its victims, which allows us to understand it as a tool for disabling opponents, rather than killing them. The "fecund arm" becomes a tool by which disability is created, rather than accommodated. Death becomes a possible, but unnecessary, aftereffect of combat. Especially in the case of the falchion, characters are consistently taking second and third blows to finish off what they began. Resisting the urge simply to read the weapon as a choice entirely tied to Richard's withered arm, and instead seeing it as one choice among many, allows us to interrogate how the weapon functions in the text. Given Richard's

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<sup>91</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 102.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>93</sup> Hans Talhoffer, *Medieval Combat* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), Plate 41.

penchant for redefining the parameters of disability to suit his own ends, we can see why such a re-structuring of normativity lends itself to the use of the weapon. Richard (like Edward) is capable of disabling his opponents, imposing a reading of their body that restricts access to power.<sup>94</sup> Because he has constructed a framework around which impairments coincide with disability, Richard is capable of bestowing a socialized disability through the use of physical violence.

Understanding this access restriction allows us to see why Richard is constantly using actual human carvings as trophies throughout the plays. When York asks his sons about their battle exploits at the beginning of *3 Henry VI*, Edward produces the “purple falchion” as evidence of his prowess, but it is Richard who supplies the head of Somerset, creating of it a puppet which he commands: “Speak thou for me, and tell them what I did” (3.I.i.16). Richard empowers himself by disjuncting the bodies of others, an action that stands in stark contrast to his brother’s less-gory, blood-painted blade. We can see a third valence of “bruised arms” in the notion that Richard is collecting trophies from his enemies’ bodies. The fact that Somerset’s agency is subsumed by Richard’s own words makes the head a kind of extension of his own will. We could understand this head as a second, “fecund” head, one that reduces its owner in the removal while extending Richard in its accrual. Richard’s acquisition of others’ body parts accommodates for his own physical variations. He perceives his means to power as an act of dismembering others:

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<sup>94</sup> See *Titus Andronicus*, III.i, in which Titus redefines the usefulness of hands in terms of good deeds.

So do I wish the crown, being so far off,  
And so I chide the means that keep me from it,  
And so, I say, I'll cut the causes off. (3.III.ii.140-142)

The causes of Richard's subjection are the limbs and heads of his opponents, and he perceives his dismembering actions as a way of disabling the control of others. The placement of such lost heads on the tower gate becomes – and always is in historical events as well – an act of extending the power of the crown through spectacle. It is this very spectacle that Richard controls so well in his performance of disability.

We need to redefine Richard as a super-human to grasp the full implications of this bodily exchange. To understand the falchion's importance in the early modern period is to understand it as a weapon of war made into a hunting tool. We might consider, for instance, a description of a boar hunt offered by William Barley in *Celestina the Faire*, published in 1596. The text describes a falchion which is shoved into a boar's mouth: "his falchion, saved him that labor, by thrusting it deep into his throat with all his force, pushing it still further in: The boar not able to endure the pain, recoiled backward more and more, casting out so great abundance of gore blood at his mouth."<sup>95</sup> The saw blade on the back of early modern falchions was meant to flay one's kill, and the fact that Richard carries around such a weapon throughout the first tetralogy brings with it the promise that Richard is likewise skinning his enemies. In fact, using falchions to flay one's enemies became such a commonplace in the period that early modern writers began rewriting mythology to incorporate the weapon's sawblade. For instance, Francis Bacon's description of the birth of Venus places a falchion at the center of the story: "*Saturn* had

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<sup>95</sup> William Barley, *Celestina the Faire*, 66. Spellings modernized.

many Children, but devoured them as soon as they were born; Jupiter only escaped, who being come to Man's estate, thrust *Saturn* his Father into Hell, and... pared off his Father's Genitals with the same Falchion that *Saturn* dismembered *Coelum*, and cast them into the Sea; from whence came *Venus*.”<sup>96</sup> Two important ideas about the falchion surface when we see such descriptions: One, the wounds brought about by the weapon are described with a level of graphic detail that might make John Ford shudder, and, two, the weapon becomes historicized to a level that associates it with the violence of the past. Like Richard's accrual of Somerset's head, Jupiter increases his own family by removing Saturn's ability to do so (the organ of generation).

Wounds created with this saw-edged blade would produce large amounts of gore. When Richard kills Henry, for instance, we get an unusually visual description of the king's blood spatter. “See how my sword weeps for the poor King's death” (3.V.vi.63), Richard gloats, “Down, down to Hell, and say I sent thee thither” (3.V.vi.67). Stabbing the king a second time demonstrates Richard's determination to finish the job, but it also seems clear that he is glorying, if not outright bathing, in the excessive blood. The physical realities of falchion combat rear their ugly heads again, as the king does not die from the first blow. Richard's plan to silence Henry and end the wars could easily be accomplished with a shorter blade, as Henry expects: “My breast can better brook thy dagger's point” (3.V.vi.27). The violence of the kill highlights that, for Richard, the point is not to kill the king per se, but to “cut the causes off” of his own subservience. The

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<sup>96</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (London: Sir Arthur Gorges, 1696). <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/home>, 44-45. Spellings modernized, emphasis Bacon's.

murder must be brutal, but not only because Shakespeare needs to emphasize Richard's evil. Richard is effectively breaking the structures that keep him off the throne.

Only here, at the end of the Wars of the Roses, do other characters pay significant attention to Richard's bent back, and in Henry's uncomfortably-accurate prophecy (recounting both past events and prophesying *Richard III*), Richard recognizes the semiotic value located in his back:

Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,  
Let Hell make crook'd my mind to answer it. (3.V.vi.78-79)

This moment is useful to us for our understanding of the dualistic nature of disability in the Richard plays. On one hand, Richard's awareness of his disability becomes newly heightened as Henry metaphorizes it through the use of prophecy. As Geoffrey A. Johns has pointed out, "monstrous births" required society to accept responsibility for the child's shape.<sup>97</sup> Social ills produced portentous children. In Henry's and Richard's cases, however, we see only Richard taking responsibility for his shape, but doing so in a proactive way. He owns and redefines the ominous nature of his embodiment. As Johns explains, deformities and their meanings were both mutable,<sup>98</sup> and it is this mutability that Richard relies upon to gain the throne. This mutability raises the second point, which is that this is the first instance of Richard trying to use his impairment to his own benefit. While we may rightly moralize about Richard's actions in *Richard III*, Richard is capable, perhaps directly *because* of Henry's prophecy, to see his impairment as others

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<sup>97</sup> Geoffrey A. Johns, "Grievous Burthen," 50-51.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

see it. He begins to imagine that he can use their judgment to his own benefit. Indeed, immediately after this exchange, Richard acknowledges his disabled invisibility: “I am not looked on in the world” (3.V.vii.22), and then we see Richard redefining and speaking to his hump. “This shoulder was ordained so thick to heave,” (3.V.vii.23) he tells us. He then shows the power of the hump as a confidant: “Work thou the way and that shalt execute” (3.V.vii.25).

Like his falchion, Richard’s hump becomes a “fecund back,” one that exceeds the powers of a normative spine, even as it provides camouflage for Richard’s evil intentions. More than just a man, Richard casts himself as the apex predator against his enemies’ prey stock. Early in *3 Henry VI*, we start to see Richard’s warfare as more sport than combat. At York’s death, Richard describes the event as “a lion in a herd of neat” (3.II.i.14). When he goes after Clifford, Richard imagines him as a sickly animal separated from the herd: “Now, Clifford, I have singled thee alone” (3.II.iv.1). He lays claim on the kill and forbids his allies to help in the pursuit:

Nay, Warwick, single out some other chase,  
For I myself will hunt this wolf to death. (3.II.iv.12-13)

Indeed, both Richard and the opposing army see him as a hunter. As Margaret and Henry fly from the pursuit, she calls him and Edward “a brace of greyhounds” (3.II.v.129). She becomes fixated on the brothers’ hunting tools, the falchions, which are “bloody steel grasped in their ireful hands” (3.II.v.132). We even see an entire hunting scene play out in Clifford’s death. When Clifford enters, he is struck through the neck with an arrow. The wound is not a clean death, and Clifford begs for a merciful reprieve:

And much effuse of blood doth make me faint.  
Come York and Richard, Warwick and the rest:  
I stabbed your fathers' bosoms; split my breast. (3.II.vi.28-20)

Like a doe running to ground, Clifford lies down, unnoticed but pursued by Richard and his party. It is here that we discover that Richard fired the deadly arrow:

Your brother Richard marked him for the grave,  
And wheresoe'er he is, he's surely dead. (3.II.vi.40-41)

The warband takes on the tenor of a hunting party in this moment; everyone has seen the arrow land on the mark, but no one knows where Clarence is until he moans out his death rattle. While the stage directions do not specify who answers Warwick's suggestion that they come: "Off with the traitor's head, / And rear it in the place your father's stands," (3.II.vi.85-86) there is no reason to assume Richard is not the one to clean the corpse. After all, he has the necessary tool at his side, and he is the one who killed the prey to begin with.

Understanding Richard as a predator helps us revisit the way Richard defines and negotiates an ableist notion of embodiment in the last half of this play, not to mention in *Richard III*. Even his plot to smuggle Edward away from his enemies relies on baiting him into the forest "Under the colour of his usual game" (3.IV.v.11). When Richard fails to kill Edward humanely, Edward begins to shake. Richard, ever the hunter, ends his misery: "Sprawl'st thou? Take that to end thy agony" (3.V.v.39). Even Margaret, enraged at the death of her son, imagines the boy's death as an act of predation; she calls the Yorkists "butchers" on multiple occasions (3.V.v.61, 63, 77), and further imagines that

they might eat the corpse: “Bloody cannibals” (3.V.v.61). George of Clarence likewise scoffs that Richard has left “To make a bloody supper in the Tower” (3.V.v.85). Margaret’s railing draws attention to the brutality of the murder, but it also emphasizes the hunterly qualities of the Yorkists. Upon his arrival, Henry considers himself the “harmless sheep” (3.V.vi.8) to Richard’s “wolf,” (3.V.vi.7) who has come “to bite the world” (3.V.vi.54). Richard’s lupine, hunterly qualities make him simultaneously less and more than a man, and it is here that we truly start to understand the ableist viewpoint of the characters in the Richard plays. Laurie Shannon explains that Shakespeare uses the notion of man as a poorly equipped animal in other contexts. She asserts that man’s plainness makes him “a helpless, radically exposed animal that (only) goes on two feet.”<sup>99</sup> Recognizing this inversion of our traditional understanding of the natural hierarchy, which places humanity on top, is important for my reading of Richard because he overcomes his human nature by equipping the falchion, adding the blade to his suite of abilities in order to overcome his human failings and situate himself as an apex predator.

Richard’s animal nature is fully realized by Act III of *Richard III* when the messenger brings Lord Hastings early-morning news of a portentous dream: “the Lord Stanley” (III.ii.3), he explains, “dreamt the boar had razed off his helm” (III.ii.10). The boar in question, naturally, refers to Richard’s heraldic device and by extension, Richard himself. By this point in the saga, everyone has recognized a connection between Richard’s martial prowess and hunting, but even still, the lords consider Richard to be the

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<sup>99</sup> Laurie Shannon, “Poor, Bare, Forked: Animal Sovereignty, Human Negative Exceptionalism, and the Natural History of ‘King Lear’.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60.2 (Summer 2009): 168-169. Accessed 13 July, 2015.



prey (albeit a dangerous one). Hastings scoffs at the notion that Richard might be filleting Stanley's head; he intones:

To fly the boar before the boar pursues  
Were to incense the boar to follow us. (III.ii.27-28)

This marks a different tone to the other descriptions of Richard; he has become a wild, dangerous animal, but he is still, at his core, amoral at worst, and certainly not evil. Hastings suggests that provoking Richard would invite his ire (and the ire would be justified in this figuration), but that the "boar" would leave everyone alone unless his hand was forced. Of course, this suggestion that Richard is first and foremost a prey animal is misled, as Hastings realizes upon his arrival at the tower.

Richard is able to enact Hastings' execution when he blames Hastings for defending witchcraft that has deformed his arm into a "blasted sapling all withered up" (III.iv.68). This moment is strange in the context of the plays, particularly because we know that Richard's arm is sometimes healthy and sometimes unwell. In *3 Henry VI*, he blames Nature for transpiring "To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub" (3.III.ii.156), but he carries a dagger for his off-hand when he sword fights, as York informs us: "O, that's the sword to it" (III.i.116). Clearly, using a defensive dagger with his falchion is impossible if his arm is actually withered as described, but understanding the performative nature of disability in the text allows us to sort out the truth. Allison Hobgood has explained that then, as now, disability makes bodies variously legible and

invisible.<sup>100</sup> The “polite” aversion of the onlooker’s gaze makes disability accrue meaning in an ableist worldview, but it simultaneously makes the actual body of the impaired person less clear. The pathologizing tendency in interpreting the withered arm means that Richard’s ailments “are not symbols of divinity or monstrosity but impairments with very real, material consequences.”<sup>101</sup> In short, the witchcraft must be a real possibility, and it is this reality that paves the way for Hastings’ execution.

Of course, Richard’s arm has always been somehow variegated from the standard expectations of bodily normativity, but it has never proven to be a disability. Why does Shakespeare only draw the audience’s attention to Richard’s withered arm now, when he screeches in disbelief about “witchcraft” (III.iv.71)? The very aversion of the gaze, the unwillingness to engage with the physical realities of impairment, has caused the other characters to miss Richard’s arm completely. This unusual scene highlights the very notions Richard engages regarding disability. Richard recognizes the social nature of disability so well that he has learned to make an arm that has remained visibly different for his entire life seem to have suddenly become shriveled merely by describing it. More than that, the courtiers immediately accept his explanation of magic and take Hastings to his doom as a result. This moment is crucial for our understanding of both Shakespeare’s Richard and of the historical Richard III. The kind of semiotic redefinition which Richard applies to his own arm also appears in our reading of non-normative bodies. We often see Shakespeare’s characterization of Richard’s back as an act of Tudor propaganda, a

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<sup>100</sup> Allison Hobgood, “Teeth Before Eyes,” in *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. Sujata Iyengar, 25.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

violent deconstruction of a historical figure's body. Such readings, however, say more about our understanding of impairment than Shakespeare's attempts to choose sides. However metaphorically Shakespeare may have intended to represent Richard III, the fact that we see Richard's back as a punishment for his malfeasance indicates our own proclivities toward moralizing the body. Richard uses his falchion to encourage such readings throughout the course of the play, and we can see the falchion in this context as a tool by which Shakespeare deconstructs moralized disability.

### Strutting Before the Wanton, Ambling Nymph

Despite his protestations that he is unable "To strut before a wanton ambling nymph" (I.i.16), Richard certainly manages to initiate a surprisingly successful strut in the very next scene. Unlike most of Shakespeare's wooers, however, Richard leads with the sexual advance. Richard tells Anne that he wants to sleep in "Your bedchamber" (I.ii.114), an assertion that forces a shared line on her recommendation that he choose "some dungeon," and seems remarkably bold, even for someone who has chosen a dead relative's funeral as the site of his courtship. To understand why Richard is able to woo the lady, however, we must understand and historicize the discursive nature of disability. In reference to *Richard III*, Mitchell and Snyder cite Richard's capacity for manipulation in his understanding of others' judgment of his impairments. He is, in short, "performing disability" for his audience.<sup>102</sup> Given this performance-based framework, we can understand Richard's peacocking as a play on Anne's unflattering expectations of him. During the period, aggressive, non-normative sexuality on the part of women was thought

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<sup>102</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 103.

to be capable of bending the spines of their male partners.<sup>103</sup> Further, Emily Bowles has demonstrated how disabilities can serve to highlight other sexually desirable traits of the disabled body.<sup>104</sup> For instance, humoral models saw female bodies as already disfigured, so seeing a woman who was blind often created a kind of hyper-sexual currency for interested onlookers.<sup>105</sup> In this context, we can understand Richard's invitation to bed as an attempt to draw attention to his body. Richard manages to reframe the shape of his back as evidence that Anne might have a sexually submissive partner should she accept his offer, and this promise of power is what starts to weaken her resolve. Richard's capacity to arbitrate disability becomes a great strength, even in times of peace, and it ultimately allows him to put Anne's own bodily wholeness under societal scrutiny.

As a widow, Anne experiences a restricted access that we might construe as a disability. While it is true that, in the period, widows maintained the social status and financial independence they enjoyed while married, as Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford explain, "Widows at all levels appealed to the stereotype of the poor, distressed, and weak individual..."<sup>106</sup> In the play, Richard certainly harbors this opinion; he says that, by killing her husband, he has "...made her widow to a woeful bed" (I.ii.251). Despite the historical evidence that suggest that early modern widows experienced unprecedented autonomy, in the world of Shakespeare's play, Lady Anne

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<sup>103</sup> Emily Bowles, "Maternal Culpability in Fetal Defects: Aphra Behn's Satiric Interrogations of Medical Models," in *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, eds. Allison Hobgood & David Houston Wood, 48-49.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>106</sup> Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.

clearly sees the loss of a husband as a dire one. Anne reminds Richard of her dead husband, and this is the point at which he explains that “He that bereft thee, lady... Did it to help thee to a better husband” (I.ii.141-142). The falchion becomes in this construction a tool by which Richard diminishes Anne’s body (in the sense that husband and wife are one flesh... we might do well here to consider common examples in the period in which the husband is the “head” of the wife).<sup>107</sup> Richard has impaired Anne by killing her husband (removing her “head” just as he removed the heads of his enemies during the wars), but he *disables* Anne by referencing her limited access as a widow. In terms of the discursive nature of disability in the period, understanding the loss of a husband as a form of disablement explains, in Bowles’ context, the sexualization of widows. The disfigurement of a missing husband makes the woman’s other deformation – the “unfinished penis” of Galenic models – stand out even more. Richard needs the marriage to Anne in order to solidify her power, and so the falchion in her hands becomes a weapon by which she can limit his access to power, just as he has done by killing her husband. Richard’s ability to make Anne see herself through the patronizing male gaze allows him to equalize her to him and ultimately woos her as a result.

In the offer of marriage, Richard hopes to supply Anne with a kind of replacement for the missing head. Much like Richard’s redefinition of his own impairments, Richard imagines himself as a replacement head, one that “loves thee better than he could” (I.ii.144). He considers the potential marriage that would result in their coupling as a *quid*

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<sup>107</sup> By way of example, in Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*: “...marriage is but a chopping and a changing, / where a maid loses one head, and has a worse one i’t’h’ / place” (IV.45-47). Here, Moll rejects male headship by equating feminine and masculine intelligence.

*pro quo*: he removed Anne's husband to offer himself as a prosthetic, and in this moment, Richard exposes the disabling function of the falchion in the texts. We see Richard carrying Somerset's head at the beginning of *3 Henry VI*, and now we see him offering himself as a prosthetic head to replace Henry. He has demonstrated over and over again his ability to curtail other bodies,<sup>108</sup> and now, he shows his own body as a restorative tool. His excess mass (instantiated particularly in his hump) becomes a source of extra material, a material that can heal the wounds it helps Richard to create. We might even read this head as a "fecund" head, in the sense that he loves her more than her previous husband. The sexual advance at the beginning of the interchange fails because it relies on a construction of Anne's female body as impaired (a construction that Anne initially rejects). However, conceiving of her body as impaired through the lens of widowhood works, as Anne has already defined her own grievance as the lack of a husband. When Anne continues to reject Richard's offer to "top" her literally and metaphorically, he changes his tactic to another *quid pro quo*. If the falchion took a head/husband that Anne was unwilling to lose, the falchion can *revenge* the loss:

If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,  
 Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword,  
 Which if thou please to hide in this true breast  
 And let the soul forth that adareth thee,  
 I lay it naked to the deadly stroke  
 And humbly beg the death upon my knee. (I.ii.176-181)

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<sup>108</sup> Richard is starkly aware of his ability to trim his enemies' bodies: "...me, / That cropped the golden prime of this sweet prince" (I.ii.250).

The notion that Anne is capable of revenging Henry's death is more than just a commonplace. Mitchell and Snyder point out that focusing on the visual differences offered by disabilities leads to the conclusion that people seek vengeance for their deformities.<sup>109</sup> Richard offers Anne a chance to take that revenge, but the implied message is that, if she refuses to act on her rage, she will instead take him to wed: "Take up the sword again, or take up me" (I.ii.186). The weapon's ability to maim and disfigure the body is hardly a threat to Richard, given his previously-impaired state, and the possibility that Anne might kill him seems unlikely, given what we know about the falchion. Instead, Richard's humility in offering the weapon places in Anne's hands the capacity to arbitrate his disability – it gives her power over the discursive limitations of his body, and this is the power that Richard uses to leverage her compliance with his suit.

The scene highlights Richard's recognition of how to stage manage disability. Richard's exultation, "Was ever woman in this humor wooed" (I.ii.230) becomes not a reference to Anne's mourning emotions, but a disavowal of the humoral forces that have shaped his own body. His reference to "this humor" is a reference to his own "monstrous birth," and it is his own recognition of interiority (*in* this humor) that sets him apart from his own embodiment. He is, like Henry V and Hamlet, a play-maker character, but his facility to direct performance is situated on hiding his true nature beneath his disability, rather than an attempt to expose truths (like Hamlet does with *The Mouse Trap*). Understanding the discursive quality of disability in the play allows us to recognize Richard's Machiavellian interiority as a patriarchal control over societal expectations.

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<sup>109</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 99.

When Richard decides to “see my shadow in the sun / And descant on mine own deformity” (I.i.26-27), he is not using his bodily difference as an excuse for bad behavior. Rather, he recognizes the cultural capital that his “crooked” back offers him. Richard not only lies to the characters in the play, but relies on half-truths and double-meanings to mislead the theatre audience. In other words:

...I clothe my naked villainy  
With odd old ends stol’n forth of Holy Writ,  
And seem a saint when most I play the devil. (335-337)

Richard’s use of misdirection is a poignant force in the play, and as we see in this scene, the category Richard positions himself within suggests a sense of displacement. Richard’s falchion transcribes truncated limits for the bodies of his foes, and he characterizes himself as a prosthetic replacement. This analogy will become important for Richard’s bid for the throne. Like the vacuum Richard creates in Anne’s household by lopping off its head, he hopes likewise to set a head on the body politic of England: himself. Richard recognizes the prejudices of others as an empowering tool; in the end, his hidden aims will “leave the world for me to bustle in” (I.i.152). We can see through Richard’s actions that early modern political theory, based on a model of embodiment, likewise allowed a space in which the state itself could become socially disabled. Richard’s wartime activities and political assassinations demonstrate that power vacuums function in the body politic much like severed limbs on the Galenic model for bodily normativity. Richard uses his insider’s knowledge of disability, coupled with his facility in arbitrating that disability, to fashion himself into a prosthetic king. Richard fills the power vacuums



that he creates on his own terms, much like a prosthetic limb compensating for the lack of a biological one. Our perception of the character's evil is based primarily on his actions, but the lasting effect of his villainy is aided by ableist notions of the normative body; just as the prosthetic limb creates discomfort in others, so the prosthetic king seems to be out of place on the head of the body politic.

### Richard on the Stage and in the Parking Lot

In Thomas More's *The History of Richard the Third*, the Elizabeth Woodville makes a comment, not-incidentally in the presence of Richard (then Duke of Gloucester). "And I doubt not also," she says, "but there be some abroad so deadly enemies unto my blood that if they wist where any of it lay in their own body, they would let it out."<sup>110</sup> The queen figures her blood as a simultaneously moralistic and pathophysiological entity. The blood must be interpreted as sign and symbol of the queen and her family, while the bloodletting she imagines her enemies engaging in is medicalized. Like a purgative, her imagined opponents see her blood (figured here in the sense of "relation") as a pathogen, or at least as a 'thing' they do not desire to keep in their bodies. At the same time, she places an obvious judgment on those enemies precisely because they fail to recognize her blood as worthy. One person's poison is another person's boon, so to speak. Removing the blood becomes a metaphorical disavowal of kinship with the queen. In this context, we can see how medicine in the early modern worldview remained moralistic even as the anatomists pushed it into a more empiricist paradigm. As with Richard's use of his

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas More, *The History of King Richard the Third* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 47.

falchion, medical realities become metaphorical proof of social forces, blending embodiment with selfhood to a confusing degree.

The dual nature of moralism and proto-scientific observation in this example points to a confusing medical notion in the period. As medieval Galenic humoralism clashed with the newly observational medicine of the anatomy hall, notions of natural disease conflicted with ideas of moralistic disease. If Galen was right, emotions were both cause and effect of disorder in the human body. A person's humors could create changes in behavior, while those behaviors could increase the levels of the offending humor. Disease in such a structure becomes metaphorical in nature; outward problems are interpreted as part of a person's character. Margaret Healy has argued, for instance, that many of these metaphorical models had classical and religious origins: "The humanist writers seem to have revived and revived many of them: following the classical precedent, they were particularly keen on using disease and medical analogies in their political tracts."<sup>111</sup> In fact, Colin Milburn reminds us that some people thought that virtue could cure disease; it was thought that having sex with a virgin could cure a man of his syphilis.<sup>112</sup> Contrarily, observational medicine dealt with the proto-scientific notion that disease was caused by outside forces, a notion that increased the possibility of pathologizing disorder. Healy cites Thomas Paynell as one of the proponents of the "caustic vapor" model, though she points out that his opinion is rare in this context.<sup>113</sup> In

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<sup>111</sup> Margaret Healy, "Discourses of the Plague in Early Modern London," in *Epidemic Disease in London*, ed. J.A.I. Champion, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Colin Milburn, "Syphilis in Faerie Land: Edmund Spenser and the Syphilography of Elizabethan England," *Criticism* 46.4 (2004): 609. Accessed 14 July, 2015.

<sup>113</sup> Healy, "Discourses of the Plague," 21.

fact, one of the benefits of humoral medicine lost in the face of observational practice was that, while some versions of bodily difference may have figured as “grotesquery,” many times, humoral medicine made bodily difference a fluctuating construct.<sup>114</sup> While it is true that the fungible nature of the humoral body could be blamed for its ailments, especially when those ailments produced a non-normative body, it also allowed for a spectrum of difference. The Platonic notion of an ideal body figures everyone as deformed to a greater or lesser degree, and as Georges Vigarello has shown, some intentional reshaping was seen as a good thing, especially in aristocratic circles, where an over-straightened, deliberately restructured spine became the mark of nobility.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, exclusively medical models pathologize difference, a consequence that reaches far for those with non-normative bodies.<sup>116</sup> Physical impairments in such a model cry out for correction, leading us to an ableist notion that only certain bodies are valid.

Today, scholars recognize the interplay between medical disability and metaphorical disability. Understanding disability as a social construct allows us to recognize self-fashioning as invested heavily in bodily normativity, while at the same time, refusing to divest the medical realities of disability. For More’s preoccupation with Elizabeth Woodville’s blood, by way of example, only in a cultural model that strides the line between medicine and metaphor can we recognize the blood as unable to mix with that of her enemies (allowing them to purge it), yet metaphorically resistant to their well-being. The blood will not mix with that of her enemies because Woodville imagines it as

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<sup>114</sup> Hobgood & Wood, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>115</sup> Georges Vigarello, “The Upward Training of the Body from the Age of Chivalry to Courtly Civility,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* (New York: Zone, 1989) 175.

<sup>116</sup> Hobgood & Wood, *Recovering Disability*, 4.

being unwilling even to associate with theirs, much as she chooses to stay away from the individuals. Woodville gives agency to her blood to enlarge the strength of her metaphor. Needing to purge the evil blood relies on a medical model, however; the blood has a different chemical composition, which is why blood can become brackish and altered through hard living. More's example sets us up to understand the complexities of disability in the period. There is no consensus between medical and metaphorical models of disability in the periods; and examples such as this one show us that these models could even coexist in the same thought.

When we talk about naturalized disability in a character like Shakespeare's Richard III, we must treat with suspicion his claims that his "crooked" back is a natural occurrence, but we do not need to read the hump as a pathologized object born of Tudor propaganda, as many scholars have done before the exhumation of the actual king's remains. When Richard describes his impairments, he gives examples from both Galenic and anatomical models. His body is simultaneously "rudely stamped," and "Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature" (I.i.16, 19).<sup>117</sup> The notion that his body has been "stamped" into its condition evokes a nurture argument – the body has been bent, just as nobility desire to reshape the body (though the goal in *that* attempt is straightness rather than "bunch-backed"). In fact, "Books on manners in the sixteenth century attribute to posture a dimension that could already be classed as personal hygiene. A bad positioning of the torso, should it become habitual in a child, is considered physically dangerous. Bad

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<sup>117</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Richard III* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

posture results in the risk of a ‘hump.’”<sup>118</sup> In this sense, we can understand Richard’s use of the word “rudely” in the context of late-medieval and early modern definitions, definitions that invoke the use of “rude” hands, generally associated with rustic labor.<sup>119</sup> Richard’s back, in this sense, becomes a mistake, one somehow done outside the bounds of usual noble civility. There is an agent behind Richard’s impairment, though this agent is carefully hidden in the phrasing of the line. On the other hand, he is “cheated of feature” by “Nature,” an assertion that begs to be metaphorized and ascribed to his personality and the source of his being. It is from this line of thought that we see Richard consider the possibility that he is “scarce half made up” (I.i.21). The dogs that bark at his passing become, much like the cannibalistic horses in *Macbeth*, a metaphorical response to the aberrations of nature.

We should be careful, however, to trust Richard’s self-description as honestly felt. Allison Hobgood notes that Richard relies on the tendency of the able-bodied to avert their gazes from the non-normative body, which makes it harder to see. This makes Richard, in Hobgood’s figuration, even more dangerous, because he relies on the obfuscation of the non-normative body to enact a Machiavellian bait-and-switch.<sup>120</sup> To that end, Richard fashions himself as disabled to achieve his goals, and the fact that he rarely talks about his impairment in the *Henry VI* plays should alert us to the constructed nature of his disability. His performance in the wars demonstrates that he is quite able-bodied in that regard, and despite his claims in the first scene that he is disabled from the

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<sup>118</sup> Georges Vigarello, “The Upward Training,” 153.

<sup>119</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, ‘Rude’, *OED* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/view/Entry/277051?result=1&rskey=kZbS8C&>.

<sup>120</sup> Allison P. Hobgood, “Teeth Before Eyes,” 35.

opportunity to “strut before a wanton, ambling nymph,” (I.i.17) by the end of the first act, he has successfully wooed Lady Anne within spitting distance of her own father-in-law’s corpse.

In this moment, we see two kinds of disability at work in the play: that which results from birth and that which results from human actions. Richard’s construction is based on his “unnatural” birth, while others’ disabilities are caused by traumatic events (such as the violence Richard enacts). In Shakespeare’s plays, Richard carries a falchion, a weapon that is, in medieval warfare, an inefficient killer, but manuals for using it place special emphasis on the dismemberment of opponents. The fact that Richard constructs his own disability in service of his ascent to the throne shows that he recognizes the discursive power of impairment. Meanwhile, he uses his falchion to create impairments in others, then he relies on that discursive lack to overreach their personal agency, creating disability in the process. Furthermore, the falchion was used in the early modern period as a hunting weapon, and we see, in taking on the falchion, Richard situates himself as hyper-abled, not disabled. Just as he fashions himself as poor Richard the hunchback, so too does he limit the limbs of others as a way of overstepping them on the way to the throne.

A return to Thomas More helps illuminate this process. When Richard learns that the two princes will be kept together in the Bloody Tower, More supplies one of his characteristically sardonic puns: “And therefore to this wicked enterprise, which he believed could not be voided, he *bent* himself and went through, and determined that

since the common mischief could not be amended, he would *turn* it as much as he might to his own *commodity*.”<sup>121</sup> In this example, More’s use of the word “bent” is particularly useful, because he uses it as a transitive verb, one aimed at Richard. Richard bends himself to the purpose, both in the sense that he plans to enact it, and that he metaphorizes his body to match the deed. In the period, the word “bend” held strong associations with the creation of tension, with a corollary implication that that tension would be released in time. A pistol that has not yet fired, for instance, could be considered “bent.”<sup>122</sup> Describing Richard’s decision to commit murder with the notion of bending adds a valence of destiny to the action that other words might not imply. Similarly, the fact that he is capable of both bending himself and “turning” the situation is telling of More’s opinion of Richard. In the 1500s, the word came to mean “pervert from the right purpose or use.”<sup>123</sup> More suggests through this pun that a normative body could not accomplish Richard’s murders, so the character has to “bend,” or pervert, himself to accommodate his treachery. The metaphorical reading of embodiment requires a fungible body, and Richard sacrifices normativity to accomplish extraordinary misdeeds. Also useful here is the word “commodity,” as the term was important to the period’s construction of disability. Relying on Galenic notions that masculine bodies were smooth, and in their smoothness, contained, Richard allows the situation to accommodate him. As Hillary M. Nunn explains, “Smooth bodies are not accommodating bodies; they are sealed, youthful, and full of unyielding power. They demand accommodation from

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<sup>121</sup> Thomas More, *The History of King Richard the Third*, 50. Emphasis mine.

<sup>122</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, ‘Bend’, *OED* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), [http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/search?searchType=dictionary&q=bend&\\_searchBtn=Search&](http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/search?searchType=dictionary&q=bend&_searchBtn=Search&).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

others, rather than give way themselves.”<sup>124</sup> In this context, Richard lays claim on a proactive, masculinist relationship with the rest of the world. To be disabled is to be restricted from access, but Richard’s unique ability is to unlock access where there otherwise is none.

In light of New Disability Studies, we can start to see the true power of Shakespeare’s Richard. What makes Richard an apex predator is not his bunched back, though he is able to use that physical impairment for destructive results. Margery Garber has argued that Richard is “an unforgettable physical figure,”<sup>125</sup> but unpacking the kinetic language of violence through the lens of New Disability Studies allows us to understand that the problem is precisely the opposite. Richard explains in 3 Henry VI that he “can add colors to the chameleon, / Change shapes for Proteus for advantages” (3.III.ii.191-192). Richard’s back is certainly not an impairment, as I have shown, but it is also not the real source of his power. Richard is able to recognize what other people in his world do not. He knows the judgment that is heaped upon his back, and he recognizes both the mystical qualities of it (the portentous dreams, the possibility of arm-withering witchcraft) and the pathologizing medical view (cheating Nature, the tendency to reduce him to a prey animal). It is generally fair to assume that asides to the audience are meant in earnest, but in a pre-Freudian world, we would be hard-pressed to prove that fictional characters’ interiority is by necessity the same as subjective human interiority. Richard tells us, directly, that he is a shape-shifting liar, and yet we fail to understand how this

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<sup>124</sup> Hillary M. Nunn, “The King’s Part,” in *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. Sujata Iyengar, 136.

<sup>125</sup> Margery Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 132.



works until he redefines his withered arm as a pathologized disability. Richard exhibits the ultimate interiority, and it seems possible that this interiority not only recognizes the power of embodiment, but is able to use it to both medical and discursive ends. When it suits him, he can use his arm to self-fashion as a victim of witchcraft, but he can just as easily use his “crooked” back to attract Lady Anne (in the worst of circumstances, no less) with the unspoken promise of sexual agency.

Richard’s falchion, then, becomes the tool of his advancement because it is the tool of the hunter. Richard’s body, medically, is non-normative, but his real power comes from the ability to read others better than they read him: “the tendency... to regard abnormal physicality as an embodied ellipsis – a deferral of immediate signification that resists attribution of singular meaning during the first moment of encounter.”<sup>126</sup> Richard only allows the characters who dismiss him for his bodily difference to survive. Those who correctly diagnose Richard as more powerful, more able, and more subtle than they always do so just before he kills them.<sup>127</sup> Richard arbitrates his own impairments through a subtle process of self-definition, while he delegates disabling impairments through the “fecund arm” of his falchion. He propagates his perceived disabilities into real disabilities. While the lopping off of a head is certainly a medical problem first and foremost, to read Richard’s string of decapitations as the creation of a kind of metaphorical disability allows us to recognize Richard’s capacity to arbitrate disability. Collecting heads curtails his enemies, but it makes Richard more powerful. Remembering

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<sup>126</sup> Geoffrey A. Johns, “Monstrous Birth,” 46.

<sup>127</sup> Henry VI and Lord Hastings being two such victims.

how Richard can collect prosthetic heads, as he does with characters such as Lady Anne, allows us to find our way to the fine line between a metaphorical model and a medical one. Disability is both embodied and circumscribed, and it is this understanding that allows us to frankly discuss the exhumation of the real Richard.

Richard in the modern day is a juggernaut of evil, and the fact that he comes with the stigma of disability has pigeon-holed our understanding of the figure. For instance, in his journal, composed during performances of the now-famous production of *Richard III* (1984), Anthony Sher writes the following: “After only two days’ work on the text I’ve become less interested in the physical shape, and more in Richard’s mind, his intelligence and cunning. I now feel encumbered by the monster image.”<sup>128</sup> Sher’s comment points to Richard’s often-overlooked personality, but it also highlights an important attitude toward Richard’s body. Sher conflates “physical shape” with “monster” in this figuration. Even now, the attitudes that lead us to understand impairment as disability, if not monstrosity, are tied to embodiment. As this chapter has shown, monstrosity is only one possible narrative of the early modern imagination, but modern performers and historians are capable of using that specific narrative to justify using monstrous terminology to describe people who are impaired. Sher’s Richard used his crutches as weapons to threaten the other characters. Understanding the falchion’s use as a fecund arm starkly highlights the dissonance between such a modern misunderstanding of disability and the one we see in the original text. Even in the present day, we still see actors understanding prostheses as a threatening challenge to bodily normativity – despite the fact that

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<sup>128</sup> Antony Sher, *Year of the King* (Pompton Plains: Limelight Editions, 2004), 160.

Richard's sword makes him better than normal. Richard's falchion makes him a superman.

When Philippa Langley and Michael Jones oversaw the exhumation of Richard's actual body in 2012, Shakespeare's rendition of the figure, or at least, people's interpretation of that rendition, followed along. "His outer deformity is meant to mirror his corrupt inner nature," Langley explains, "The Shakespearean Richard is hunchbacked, with a limping gait, and has a withered arm. So much invective gives us another reason why the search for Richard's remains is so important: we need to know what he actually looked like."<sup>129</sup> While it is never overtly stated, such comments make it clear that the Richard III Society's aims in the dig were at least partly meant to exonerate Richard of his bad press by proving that his back was straight.

When the body was uncovered, Langley had this to say: "The spine has the most excruciating 'S' shape... This skeleton was a hunchback... The word hits me like a sucker-punch. No... How can he have worn armour with a hump in his back? ...How could he fight with his head tilted downward?"<sup>130</sup> The reaction is the perfect example of the phenomena I have described in this chapter. Langley reads seamless metaphor in Shakespeare's Richard, and seeks answers in purely medical terms. However, focusing entirely upon medical models leaves no room for social interpretations, causing Langley's reading of the real Richard's spine to turn toward excuses. She seeks disability because disability can allow her to lose sight of Richard's physical remains in the

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<sup>129</sup> Philippa Langley and Michael Jones, *The King's Grave* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 37.

<sup>130</sup> Langley and Jones, *The King's Grave*, 137.

associations and labels with which disability comes. The body cannot, she thinks, be Richard, because a bent spine could not fight as the history books tell us that Richard did. The same phenomenon that Shakespeare's Richard enacts upon his audience finds its way into the real-world body of the king precisely for the same reasons. The recognition of others' interpretation of deformity, which I have outlined in this chapter, comes to reconfigure Langley's view of the body. In this moment (and, to her credit, she later rejects this interpretation), Langley feels as though accepting disability means accepting the Tudor narrative, true or otherwise. Finding the "excruciating" spine tells her that Richard was, perhaps, the monster the Tudors claimed he was.

In truth, the body plays into a similar process of hiding that Shakespeare's Richard enacts. Subsumed under the label of disability, Langley is unable to actually see the body for what it is, which is to say, differently shaped than normative models might proscribe. She is unable to conceive of how the king may have fought because she assumes that there is only one dialect in the kinetic language of violence – one that is as perfectly representative of the fight manuals as bodies are meant to represent Platonic notions of symmetry. Whether or not a back could handle the rigors of combat is not the question. Rather, we might ask how a back moved during combat – not because that back is more or less straight than others, but because all backs, by being attached to individuals, move along a spectrum of similitude. Each conversation held in the kinetic language of violence is as unique as the voices in spoken conversations. Just as the fight manuals proscribe a certain kind of movement through pictures and text, the actual fighters will find their reality does not exactly match the abstracted diagrams. So, too, do

early modern notions of bodily normativity create tension with the spectrum of embodiment in the real world. To recognize and celebrate the variations from the unattainable norm – what we know as “difference” – is a key factor in our search to understand interiority and selfhood. As for Richard, the man may have been the monster the Tudors feared, but if so, it was his capacity for child-murder, not his back, that made him a bottled spider.

CHAPTER SECONDE: “EITHER FOR FIGHTING OR FOR DRUDGING” –

THE DAGGER AND THE APPROPRIATION OF MANHOOD

### CHAPTER III

#### THE DAGGER AND THE APPROPRIATION OF MANHOOD

Daggers in the early modern period were everywhere; they were used as both utensils at the dinner table and as weapons. As a result, early modern folk rarely found the presence of a dagger remarkable, let alone uncomfortable.<sup>131</sup> In fact, daggers can be more closely associated with clothing than swords can, because they were considered items of fashion. Fashionable daggers were so popular that there even exists a type of dagger called the “Holbein dagger,” named after the artist Hans Holbein, who designed a prolific number of them.<sup>132</sup> Compared to rapiers, which were common, yet conspicuously martial, daggers were so innocuous that they became the favored weapon of assassins, due to the owner’s ability to conceal them easily – consider the phrase “cloak and dagger” as a reference to nefarious dealings. Even if such a weapon were discovered on the body of an assassin, their necessity to everyday life made them easy to explain away. Indeed, King Henry III of France died on the dagger of a Dominican friar as late as 1589.<sup>133</sup> In contrast to swords like the falchion, which are obviously carried in addition to normal clothing, it is perhaps the dagger’s quotidian nature that made it such an alluring

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<sup>131</sup> See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.

<sup>132</sup> Harvey J.S. Withers and Tobias Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History of Knives, Swords, Spears & Daggers* (China: Hermes House, 2013), 40-41.

<sup>133</sup> Withers and Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History*, 36-37.

choice of weapon for English dramatists to place in the hands of women and servants, who occupied a particular class of people that was highly visible, but not seen as an immediate threat. Many plays gained dramatic traction from the possibility that these innocuous people would use their invisibility for murder. In this way, the dagger articulates many of the classed and gendered prejudices associated with these two groups because it shares with them the characteristic of being “hidden in plain sight.”

Daggers in the period came in many shapes and sizes, and these differences were noticeably regional. Unlike swords, which are often specifically named by type (such as rapiers, tucks, falchions, and so on), daggers are usually called by more generic names. It is likely that this naming convention is a result of the regional divisions between daggers. Because daggers were more region-specific, geography, rather than language, would specify what dagger should be used. The only exception to this rule was the cross-hilted dagger.<sup>134</sup> This weapon owed its popularity to the rise of the rapier, which was usually combined with a sidearm, including but not limited to tools of diversion (such as cloaks), defensive tools (such as daggers and gauntlets), shields (such as bucklers), and offensive weapons (such as a second rapier, known as a “case”). Daggers used with the rapier are sometimes called “defensing” daggers because they provided defense for the user, and share an etymology with the term “fencing.”<sup>135</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I shall avoid discussion of these daggers when they are coupled with a rapier, since the rapier/dagger combination was viewed as a single fighting style, and is, practically

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<sup>134</sup> Withers and Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History*, 40.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



speaking, a single weapon split between two hands.<sup>136</sup> Rhetorically speaking, the most valuable dagger for self-fashioning was the one that was unique along regional lines. In England, the clear choice was the “ballock” dagger, also called a “dudgeon.” This dagger, which I shall describe below, is the primary focus for this chapter. As Ewart Oakeshott explains, “The ballock dagger, first shown in art in manuscript pictures and sculptured effigies late in the thirteenth century, had always strong regional links with England and the Low Countries and, later, with the areas of Burgundian influence.”<sup>137</sup> It is important to mention them here, however, because the ballock/dudgeon style daggers I shall discuss in the pages that follow work differently than the defending daggers because they were not coupled with a sword. It is generally safe to assume that, when a fighter is using the rapier and dagger together, the dagger is some variation on the cross-hilted variety, but that this is not frequently the case for those who did not carry a sword. When a text calls for a dagger on its own, based on historical precedent and in lieu of a specific indication to the contrary, the ballock dagger is almost certainly the weapon of choice.

The fact that ballock daggers were so common suggests a noteworthy, visually striking aspect of early modern culture. As a decorative item, the ballock dagger is exceptional because the hilt is shaped to resemble a penis, complete with testicles.<sup>138</sup> These weapons were so provocatively designed that the Victorians would coyly refer to them as “kidney daggers,” in hopes of explaining away the testicular orbs.<sup>139</sup> So far, I

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<sup>136</sup> Hamlet puns on this notion before his duel with Laertes – he points out that it is strange that rapier and dagger are considered a single weapon.

<sup>137</sup> Ewart Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armor* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 228.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

have avoided using sexualized terms to describe bladed combat in order to problematize standard readings of penetrative, sexualized violence. While not all encounters with daggers are necessarily sexualized, the phallic nature of the ballock dagger suggests that there had to be some sort of sexual component to the violence it enacted. That being said, the way we see the dagger employed in many early modern texts counters simple readings of effeminacy in defeat and masculinity in victory. To read the sword (or dagger) exclusively as a phallus is to privilege either a violent form of sexuality or a sexualized instantiation of violence. My purpose here is to show how certain instantiations of sexuality appeared through the use of bladed weapons, and what they can tell us. Knowing the historical nature of daggers in the period allows us to engage with the traditional critique of violence that understanding acts of aggression sexually, but as we shall see, the dagger troubles these readings by providing an asexual (rather than hyper-sexual) understanding of the body. Here, I shall engage the particularly noteworthy moment of Juliet's suicide in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to discuss the anti-erotic undertones in a moment that scholars consistently read as erotic. Then, I shall examine a subversive moment in *The Merchant of Venice* in which Portia uses a ballock dagger to symbolize her cooption of masculine agency in her marriage. I shall then explore the ways that ballock daggers serve as indicators of patriarchal agency in both an obscure play, Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*, and an extremely popular one: Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. These daggers use the imagery of the phallus to reassert patriarchal norms through feminine agents, positioning the phallus as a referent which negates unfettered male headship. While *The Maid's Tragedy* engages masculine agency

through the eyes of a woman (a tactic that resonates with the moments in *Merchant* and *Romeo and Juliet*), *Macbeth* is exceptional because the ballock dagger intersects with masculine agency through the eyes of a traditionally masculine man – the eponymous Macbeth. As I shall show, the ballock dagger highlights masculine agency as it appears when divorced from biological manhood, but it can also emphasize the performative fragility of the biological male’s gendered performances. Exploring these two plays in conversation with one another brings to light an anxiety in the early modern theatre community regarding King James’ ability to rule the country while engaging in nocturnal behaviors that contravened heteronormative patriarchal mores.

With its phallic shape, the ballock dagger (also called a “dudgeon”) becomes a tool through which masculine agency could be communicated. While we generally tend to rely on the gender binary for our understanding of manhood in the period, Alexandra Shepard has pointed out that “the social practice of manhood was enormously diverse, contingent, and contradictory, influenced by and informing distinctions of age, social status, marital status, and context.”<sup>140</sup> Therefore, when we discuss “manhood” in the period, we cannot speak of it as a monolithic social distinction, especially when such readings rely on a consideration that all men received privilege evenly. Indeed, in Shepard’s analysis, the notion of “man’s estate,” or the system of privilege that situated manhood as a locus of personal agency and power “by no means privileged all men or subordinated all women.”<sup>141</sup> Indeed, trying to read too much of a biologically-oriented

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<sup>140</sup> Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

sexual valence in the suggestively shaped hilt of such a dagger is challenged by the performative nature of gender writ large. Judith Butler, for instance, argues that the phallus can actually negate the biological penis because it announces and signifies something that it cannot inherently be.<sup>142</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the middle ground between biology and selfhood that swords and daggers can occupy allows us to nuance the way we understand gender in the period: not everyone with a penis can have a phallus, and not everyone with a phallus necessarily has a penis.

This understanding leads us to the conclusion that there is a subtle difference between patriarchal authority and masculine agency. Masculine agency presents itself as the empowered ability to police the borders of the body and to reestablish the status quo, *vis-à-vis* patriarchal expectations. Feminine agency becomes an opposition to its masculine counterpart – we see feminine agency situated as characteristically rebellious in nature. Leaking feminine bodies fail to police their own boundaries, and open female mouths challenge authority and subvert patriarchal control. The phallic dagger, when placed in its “proper” sheath, prevents leaking in the same way as a cork stops up a bottle, and so the phallic referent of the dagger instantiates masculine agency insofar as it authorizes self-control within a patriarchal structure. Patriarchal authority in turn represents the nebulous structures that keep early modern society functional according to its own definitions. The phallic nature of the ballock dagger represents the onus of masculine agents (biologically both male and female) to reassert patriarchal norms, while opposition to patriarchal authority defines feminine agency as a rejection of masculine

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<sup>142</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 51.

agency. Masculine and feminine agency both become performative reactions to patriarchal structure, which in turn authorizes systems of control by defining their expectations. The penis becomes a sort of false evidence for masculinity primarily because both men and women fail to prosper within the structures and strictures of patriarchal agency.

This chapter will emphasize the ways in which this fluid negotiation of manhood takes place among those who traditionally cannot claim masculine agency. When Jennifer Low describes how women engaged in duels during the period (mostly in drama and literature), she explains that “they attempt the duel primarily as a didactic device. Their combats are not initiated by the circumstances that generally prompt male characters to fight; on the contrary, their motive is frequently the one that prompted duels among men in real life: perceived disrespect toward them or theirs.”<sup>143</sup> This is a significant point, because while taking a sword was an act usually reserved for men in the period, Low’s conclusions demonstrate that the androgyny of a woman using a sword was not treated with the level of disgust we often assume. For instance, in the pamphlet *Haec-Vir* (1620), the mannish-woman explains that feminine androgyny exists in response to the effeminate behavior of men: “Be men in shape, men in shew, men in words, men in actions, men in counsel, men in example: then we will love and serve you.”<sup>144</sup> While this statement certainly reinforces phallocentric patriarchy in a greater perspective, it also shows that there is a space for the feminine subject to act in her own best interests, laying

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<sup>143</sup> Jennifer Low, *Manhood and the Duel: Masculinity in Early Modern Drama and Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 140.

<sup>144</sup> Anonymous, *Haec Vir*. (London: J.T., 1620). <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/home>, *D1r*. Spellings modernized.

claim on a patriarchy-affirming masculine agency, when the usual arbiters of patriarchy fail to live up to their own standards. Ultimately, this convention suggests that, for many period writers, masculine agency is anything that reestablishes the accepted social order.

Hidden in plain sight, daggers serve a highly patriarchal purpose when carried alone: the presence of a defensive weapon allows one to maintain the unity and solidity of the body at a moment's notice by defending against attacks, but it does not empower one to rejoin in a way that invades the space of others as a sword does. As Jennifer Low has argued, "The frequency with which fencing manuals conflate the body and the defensive ward [an imaginary wall in front of the duelist that the sword is meant to prevent from being breached] suggests that the penetration of the ward was interpreted as a penetration of the body."<sup>145</sup> Therefore, the dagger, with its more defensive function, serves as the tool of autonomous masculine agency, because it is necessary to the preservation of the unified, impenetrable masculine body. Gail Kern Paster explains that humoral medical models in the period demanded that the porous body exercise control over its own ingress and egress. This expectation is gendered, as "the issue is women's bodily self-control or, more precisely, the representation of a particular kind of uncontrol as a function of gender."<sup>146</sup> If a masculine body is one which is solid enough to exercise control over its own boundaries, which is to say, one that is protected from outside invasion or imposition, then having the capacity to preserve the unity of the body is in large part what makes a body "masculine" in the early modern imagination. The dagger is

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<sup>145</sup> Jennifer Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 44.

<sup>146</sup> Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 25.

uniquely positioned in this regard, both because it is ever-present, and because it is primarily used for defense, rather than offence. It is perhaps the period's lionization of bodily unity that makes healed wounds become a record of the masculine body's impenetrability,<sup>147</sup> while open and lethal wounds become a signifier of femininity. By way of example, Paster argues that Julius Caesar's death in Shakespeare's play is a feminine one because his aspirations are coded as "plethoric," or a sign of uncontrolled excess, that must be purged through bloodletting, drawing a distinction between seeping and spurting.<sup>148</sup>

Women were thought to be intemperate and leaky, and less-privileged men were seen as similarly open and uncontained. This comparative lack of permeability placed an onus on those men who were lifted up by the patriarchal structure to enforce the limitations of their own bodies; it was a charge that defined their sense of self along both classed and gendered lines. It would make a great deal of sense that so many daggers were shaped like a male organ of generation, then, as a way of establishing the solidity of masculine bodies while corroborating a visible link between biological sex and gender. Alexandra Shepard has explained that "the generic body idealized by medical writers was almost always assumed to be male, whereas female bodies and the qualities associated with them generally only received explicit attention as deviations from the routinely invoked male form."<sup>149</sup> More specifically, the vagina was thought to be of the same basic structure as a penis. The individual organs associated with the woman's genitals were

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<sup>147</sup> Gail Kern Paster shows that, in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the hypermasculine warrior's wounds bleed derisively, spitting the blood out. Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 96.

<sup>148</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 104.

<sup>149</sup> Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 47.

thought to correspond to those of a man, except that everything was, as Katharine Park descriptively illustrates, “folded inward.”<sup>150</sup> It is fascinating that the ballock dagger should be so suggestively shaped, however, because while most weapons were not easily available to women, daggers crossed both gendered and classed lines. In fact, the dagger that was most likely to be carried by privileged males would have been paired with a rapier (a cross-hilted dagger), meaning that the ballock dagger would have been most often found among women and underprivileged males. This chapter will focus primarily on the ways in which early modern playwrights use the defensive valences of daggers in conjunction with the gendered construct of biological sex. My argument will highlight the ways in which the ballock dagger negotiates and re-constructs masculine agency as an idea that is simultaneously gendered and sexed.

### The Dagger in Combat

An important point to remember when discussing daggers used alone is that the weapon is held and used differently when it is the only weapon. Rapier and dagger manuals almost exclusively show the cross-hilted dagger held in a “sword grip” position, in which the blade is held upright along the same lines as the thumb. In fact, many examples of cross-hilted daggers, such as the *main gauche*,<sup>151</sup> had a depression in the

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<sup>150</sup> Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 186. The notion that women were simply malformed males came to early modern culture through Aristotle, and its influence was felt for most of the period.

<sup>151</sup> A cross-hilted dagger with a heavy guard over the hand.



ricasso<sup>152</sup> meant to help stabilize the thumb in the sword grip position.<sup>153</sup> While to my knowledge there are no early modern fight manuals for dagger alone, there are three well-known texts from the mid-to-late medieval schools that bear inspection. These manuals include the anonymous *Gladiatora* (~1450), the manual included in the *Codex Wallerstein* (assembled ~ 1556 from texts estimated to be from ~1464), and Hans Talhoffer's *Fechtbuch* (1467). Each of these manuals favor the use of the "icepick grip," which involves holding the dagger with the blade pointed down in the opposite direction of the thumb.<sup>154</sup> In *Gladiatora*, the master favors the Icepick grip over the sword grip twenty-two out of thirty-six times.<sup>155</sup> The use of the icepick grip is even more pronounced in the other two manuals. These manuals, because they are medieval texts, show the use of roundel daggers, rather than the ballock dagger, but since the ballock dagger evolved from the roundel, I feel confident that these manuals are instructive for how the ballock dagger was used in the early modern period.

One of the most striking features of dagger combat is how defensive it is, even when it is the only weapon involved. There are several methods for using the dagger to parry the arm or dagger of one's opponent, and they interestingly use the non-dominant hand to reinforce parries by gripping the blade (which one would expect to be too sharp to grasp). These parries are referred to as "shields" in Talhoffer, and allow the fighter to

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<sup>152</sup> The ricasso is an unsharpened section near the start of the blade that is meant to help the blade fit easily into the scabbard and protect the important points of the weapon from moisture. It is sometimes called a "rain guard."

<sup>153</sup> Withers and Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History*, 46.

<sup>154</sup> John Clements, *Masters of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts: Rediscovering the Western Combat Heritage* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 2008), 174.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

deflect incoming stabs: “The fighter on the far left makes the upper shield with his dagger to block his opponent’s stab from above.”<sup>156</sup> The *Codex Wallerstein* also recommends this method, and even contains suggestions of ways to use the added leverage of the off-hand to “wind his dagger away from his hand.”<sup>157</sup> This type of maneuver tells us that the edges of such daggers were likely sharpened little, if at all, as even a gauntleted hand could receive injury from a razor-sharp blade when reinforcing a parry. The weapon’s relatively dull edge suggests that defense is more important than offence, and that the dagger user would be forced to use point work to kill an opponent. Two factors corroborate the emphasis on defense and regular use of the point: the extensive application of wrestling and the lack of slashing attacks present in the manuals.

All three manuals provide methods for applying the dagger to wrestling throws and trips. *Codex Wallerstein* relies on the opponent’s inside knee for leverage: “thrust your dagger between his legs and raise him up, as depicted here, so that you throw him on his back.”<sup>158</sup> Perhaps anticipating skepticism about the validity of some of the movies, the scribe of Talhoffer’s manual asserts the master’s authority regarding such maneuvers: “[the fighter responds to an attack by] grappling his adversary below the thigh with his right arm to throw him... The Master (Talhoffer) has himself overseen this work.”<sup>159</sup> In *Gladiatoria*, there are even maneuvers that use the dagger on the neck in order to initiate a throw.<sup>160</sup> All of these manuals highlight the close quarters of dagger combat, but they

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<sup>156</sup> Hans Talhoffer, *Medieval Combat* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2006), Plate 171.

<sup>157</sup> Grzegorz Zabinski and Bartłomiej Walczak, *Codex Wallernstein* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>158</sup> Zabinski and Walczak, *Codex Wallernstein*, 120.

<sup>159</sup> Talhoffer, *Medieval Combat*, Plate 188.

<sup>160</sup> Clements, *Western Combat Heritage*, 193.

also show that applying pressure to the blade is better for throwing one's opponent than actually slashing his flesh. This tells us that the dagger was expected to serve a defensive purpose first and foremost, with the point used only to finish the fight (unlike rapiers, which use parries in such a way as to initiate an attack). Another noteworthy point is the emphasis on throwing one's opponent to the ground. This type of combat is more intimate than typical sword combat (perhaps unsurprising, considering the length of a dagger). The fact that the ballock dagger has a phallic shape, compounded by the positioning of the hand on the hilt and the likelihood that one's opponent is prone when the blow is delivered, means that killing an opponent produced a rather intimate configuration. The configuration of fighters in this position strongly resembles the kind of coital topping that we shall see in my analysis of *The Maid's Tragedy* and *Macbeth*.

Finally, the manuals agree that the most efficient way to dispatch one's opponent is to insert the point into them. This means that the (limited) offensive uses of the dagger are distinctly penetrative, adding to the perceived sexualized nature of dagger combat. Bartłomiej Walczak, translating *Gladiatoria*, offers a telling observation: "The targets of attack include the face, the breast, the visor, and the groin."<sup>161</sup> Three of these four targets end with the dagger protruding from a suggestive location, a fact that has some practical aspects (there are major organs, arteries, or veins in all of these locations), but no doubt contributes to the frequent sexualization of dagger fights (an opponent gushing blood from his groin while an evocatively phallic dagger hilt juts out from the wound would provide a lasting memory, to say the least). The *Codex Wallerstein* offers a particularly

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 174.

nasty example of the same: “hit his right hand with your left from outside so that he stabs himself in the testicles and then thrust with your dagger from above at his throat as depicted here.”<sup>162</sup> In fact, the *Codex* offers more examples of testicular extrication than it does attacks at the face or chest (there are two groin-region attacks, one which uses a parry to turn the attack back at the opponent’s face, and no blows at the chest).<sup>163</sup> The exception to this is Talhoffer, though he only offers a single example of a kill that takes place while standing (aimed at the chest).<sup>164</sup> Importantly, these examples show a unique emphasis on humiliating the opponent while trying to keep attacks as lethal as possible. Furthermore, the locations of three of the major targets often appear as sites of feminine leaking and excess, more strongly paralleling patriarchal narratives of self-control. The dagger’s mechanical use plugs the object into locations on the body that were traditionally associated with overflowing, which may explain why the dagger often operates as a plug in more-metaphorical literary texts.

The dagger manuals’ emphasis on bodily humiliation bears out in history as well. Jennifer Low shows that “Manhood is repeatedly defined over and against boyhood, as immaturity and femininity function yet again as alternative Others that define masculinity.”<sup>165</sup> For this reason, it was not unheard of for the winners of battles to engage in acts of bodily mutilation, “castrating the corpses and placing their genitalia in their

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<sup>162</sup> Clements, *Western Combat Heritage*, 114.

<sup>163</sup> These calculations are based on the “winner’s” maneuvers. Several examples show the opponent attacking the head and chest, but the attacker is parried and defeated in each.

<sup>164</sup> Talhoffer, *Medieval Combat*, Plate 190.

<sup>165</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 84.

mouths,”<sup>166</sup> among others. Leaving the dagger in the body at a suggestive location demonstrates that even the usually practical sword masters recognized the need for demoralizing their surviving opponents. To place this phallic dagger in a person’s groin is to imply that the victim needed the addition; it is an action clearly tied to my definition of masculine agency. It represents the victor’s successful “plugging up” of the leaky, effeminized body of the loser. Besides the obvious addition of a phallic referent to the dying body, as I shall show, being able to defend the ingress into one’s body became part-and-parcel with masculinity in the High Middle Ages and throughout the early modern period. For this reason, the act of inserting the weapon is itself feminizing because the opponent has failed to police the boundaries of his body, and the shape of the weapon allows the act to serve a symbolic function. Successfully inserting the dagger into opponents shows them to be permeable, contradictorily validating the act of violence that plugged the leak to begin with. Masculine agency, situated in the phallus, becomes any act that reasserts patriarchal authority. The effeminized agent is forced to house the phallus of the victor as a sign that their leakier body required better containment. Because the stabbed person cannot police his or her corporeal boundaries, an outside agent possessed of masculine authority must exercise that control over the offensively uncontained body in order to reassert patriarchy and impose impermeability on that body (counterintuitively, with an act of penetration).

With this structure of containment/plugging up, we can see a medicalized valence to the dagger’s insertion, but the scientific re-inscription of bodily wholeness only works

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 85.

to a certain extent before it succumbs to metaphor. The line between bodies that are subjected to and those that are empowered by patriarchal norms becomes blurred by the notion that even leaky bodies can be stopped up. The model implies that feminine bodies fail to accomplish masculine wholeness due to willfulness, rather than nature, and that they earn any correction that they receive. The tension at work here exists between heteronormative structures of sexuality and the humoral notion of a porous body. The winner of the fight has “corrected” the loser by supplying what he or she previously “lacked,” be it a phallus or the agency that ostensibly comes with it. By understanding the dagger combat as “corrective” of the humoral body, we can see the heteronormative impulse of embodied wholeness. These figurations bear out in patriarchal medical concepts throughout the period, including but not limited to the “wandering womb,” which destructively roamed the body when not fed a sufficient diet of semen.<sup>167</sup> In the hands of the user, the dagger is a fecund arm (or, perhaps more accurately, a fecund phallus) in the same way that the sword can be. Those with agency are expected to enforce their authority over the entrances to others’ porous bodies, extending the influence of their body into the open spaces of others’ bodies.

In the body of the victim, however, the dagger becomes a prosthetic (in Mitchel and Snyder’s sense of prosthesis) in that it accommodates for a lack. Bodies that are allowed to be pierced are viewed with suspicion – a site of dearth that wishes to be filled.

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<sup>167</sup> Christopher A. Faraone argues that the “wandering womb” notion originated in Greece and Rome, where it was figured as a “canine or bovine” demon biting or otherwise attacking the body. He explains that this perception likely led to many myths in which women are transformed into animals. Christopher A. Faraone, “Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Greek World,” *Classical Antiquity*, 30.1 (2011) 13, Accessed December 29, 2015.

Because filling the hole pushes a body into the realm of normativity in such a way that subjected bodies resemble other, more empowered bodies, it is now equipped with a phallus. While the mechanical reality of stabbing someone results in injury or death, the metaphorical valence of such acts upholds the notion that a victim is, in this case, a patient. As we saw with Richard in the last chapter, controlling this phallic weapon places the aggressor in the position of masculine agent because they control the discourse around disability. By penetrating the victim's body, the stabber communicates that his or her opponent's body is incomplete and therefore penetrable. The dagger, as a fecund phallus belonging to the attacker, extends the aggressor's masculine agency into the leaky body of the target. The act of stabbing a body with a phallic dagger enforces conformity to a masculinist model for bodily wholeness. Performatively speaking, the kinetic language of violence transforms aggression into healing as we understand the uncontrolled, leaky body of the victim as being plugged through a medical procedure. Contrary to typical understandings of penetration as effeminizing, this sort of penetration actually codes the body as male. As a result, masculine agency shows itself to be conformity to patriarchal structures, structures which lionize the phallus as the referent to be achieved. Suicides or murders become didactic; we are expected to learn how to conform to society's expectations by observing such acts of violence. Failure to conform to this masculinist model of bodily wholeness is understood as feminine rebelliousness, as opposed to feminine passivity as seen in *Romeo and Juliet*, and as a result stands for bodily openness, which asks, by its very existence, to be corrected.

### “My Weapon Should Quickly Have Been Out”: Agency and the Servant’s Dagger

Peter, the illiterate servant in *Romeo and Juliet*, offers us a good example of a conventional use of daggers among servant characters. In fact, in *Romeo and Juliet*, there is an impressive hierarchy of weaponry paraded about the stage. From the top down, we see Old Capulet calling for the knightly longsword of the medieval warrior (I.i.73).<sup>168</sup> The aristocratic young men of in the play, lower in station than the patriarchs, but only just so, carry the typical rapier and dagger combination we see most often throughout early modern drama (V.iii.204-205). Below them, the household’s men-at-arms, servants who help protect the central members of the house, carry the sword-and-buckler combination (I.i.i). Finally, we learn that both Juliet (IV.iii.23) and Peter (IV.v.114) own and use personal daggers. The ownership of such a variety of weaponry may seem random, but as listed here, we can immediately see a division between the different users and their station in life. The only outlier in what is otherwise a clearly striated hierarchy is Juliet, whose ownership of the dagger places her on par with her manservant. I shall discuss the rapiers in detail in the final chapter, but for the purposes of this argument, this example begins to show how connected class and gender often were. The fact that Juliet, as a woman, is offered only enough weapons technology to fight on par with a servant, neither of whom could hope to win a fight against the other weapons, illustrates the fact that the higher-level men in the household were expected to take responsibility for fighting, while Peter and Juliet are only allowed to carry defensive weapons. The dagger empowers both to conform to patriarchal expectations of bodily unity, while the

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<sup>168</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet* (London: Methuen, 2012).



ownership of *only* a dagger ensures that they will not overreach their own stations and impose upon the boundaries of empowered male bodies.

Peter, as the lowest servant in Juliet's household, does not carry a sword as the other servants do. He expects to use the weapon as a means of defending himself and the nurse, but Shakespeare employs his plebian cowardice for comedic effect instead:

Nurse: ...And thou must stand by too and suffer every knave to use me at his pleasure!

Peter: I saw no man use you at his pleasure; if I had, my weapon should quickly have been out. I warrant you, I dare draw as soon as any man, if I see occasion in a good quarrel and the law on my side. (II.iv.148-154)

The fact that Peter does not exercise his masculine position to protect the nurse from the sexual advances of Mercutio and his pack effeminizes him and highlights the limited agency of the lower classes. In turn, we see here the connections between class and gender. Despite Peter's protestations, the "good cause" he describes exists very palpably in this scene, but his inability to overreach his own station in life to challenge the young aristocrats is exacerbated by the fact that his dagger, while perfectly useful to defend himself, would be incapable of outreaching the roaring boys' rapiers. Challenging the youngsters to a duel would be to invite catastrophe, and the threat of disaster serves as a socialized method of containment that reinforces the standard phallogentric patriarchy we have come to expect. One may choose whether to read Peter's citation of a "good quarrel" as either his belief that the nurse's chastity is indefensible or that the other men were not out-facing common decency, but either way, the class gap is felt keenly in this moment, as Peter parodies the notions of aristocratic honor duel without actually enacting

one. Because Peter redefines the circumstances as being devoid of the “good cause,” he is able to let his manhood reside – safely – in its sheath, without being asked to prove its validity. Peter achieves a version of masculine agency not through aggression, but because he submits to the authority of his social betters and conforms to the rules that govern the class system.

Lest we think that Peter has no fighting spirit, though, he does actually draw his weapon at one point. When the musicians argue with him, Peter threatens them with his “iron dagger” (122). The iron metal demonstrates the cheapness of the weapon: the fact that Peter cannot afford a steel dagger is one more example of his embattled masculine agency. While nothing comes of drawing it, the ability of such a weapon to preserve him in a fight against a (harder) steel rapier would be severely hampered. Insulted with the term “creature,” Peter exclaims “Then will I lay the serving-creature’s dagger on / your pate. I will carry no crotchets” (IV.v.114-115). The musicians insist upon fair play, however: “Pray you put up your dagger and put out your wit,” (IV.v.119) an offer which Peter accepts. Peter socially elevates himself above the musicians by demonstrating his enhanced masculine agency; the musicians’ lack of defensive daggers means that there cannot be a fight. The battle of wits, which Peter loses, becomes a substitute for the exercise of status that a fight would allow. Peter’s unwillingness to act upon his threat shows him to be hilariously unprepared to behave like an aristocratic male would in the same situation. While Mercutio, Tybalt, and the others are always ready for a fight, good or no, Peter stands on ceremony in such a way that allows him to avoid “standing” altogether.

### “This is Thy Sheath”: The Dagger and Monolithic Chastity

Juliet’s use of the dagger further highlights the connections between masculine agency and self-defense. Of note here is that Juliet actually wields two separate daggers in *Romeo and Juliet*. We see that she owns her own; she starts to kill herself in IV.iii with a personal dagger. There is no indication what kind of dagger Juliet is holding in this scene, but we do know that she kills herself with Romeo’s dagger in the tomb at the end of the play. Knowing that the dagger carries such strong ties to masculine agency informs our understanding of why Juliet loses her own dagger somewhere between her bedroom and the tomb – and why Shakespeare goes to the extra trouble to have her use Romeo’s weapon instead. One highly gendered clue comes from the etymology of the word “vagina.” According to the OED, “vagina” comes from a Latinate root meaning “sheath.”<sup>169</sup> The notion that a vagina is a sheath implies that there is a complimentary relationship between male and female organs of generation. In other words, there is a “rightness” ascribed to heteronormative sexuality in the etymological origins of the term “vagina,” and the dagger becomes closely associated with the penis as a result. The dagger, as a symbol for masculine agency and virility, is housed in his wife’s body, establishing a heteronormative valence to female submission – the wife, as a vessel, houses her husband’s agency as a sheath houses a dagger.

When Juliet stabs herself, she exclaims “O happy dagger! / This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die” (V.iii.169-170). Because Juliet takes Romeo’s dagger, which

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<sup>169</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 'Vagina', *OED* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/view/Entry/221017?redirectedFrom=vagina#eid>

he was using in conjunction with a rapier, we can assume that Juliet is using a cross-hilted dagger. The “defensing” dagger, usually used for personal protection, becomes an article of suicide passed from husband to wife. No shortage of scholars has seen this moment, and moments like it, as Marjorie Garber does, as leaving “little doubt of their double meaning.”<sup>170</sup> I should like to express my doubts that we should insist upon the monolithic eroticism of such moments, however. I contend that Juliet’s suicide is actually anti-erotic, and focusing on the dagger allows us to see why the weapon makes her body less permeable, rather than simply replicating the kind of penetration it actually prevents.

It may seem counterintuitive for me to insist upon the traditional relationship between the vagina and the scabbard, only to deny the sexual valences of the scene, but this is a point at which knowing the historical nature of daggers, as Shakespeare’s audience did, becomes useful. The fact that Shakespeare had easy access to the phallus-shaped ballock dagger (as I discuss below), yet chooses instead to have Juliet grab her husband’s less-phallic cross-hilted dagger to stab herself, all while invoking derogatory Latin connotations tying vaginas to sheaths, demonstrates that something other than sex is happening in the scene. If, as Garber explains, the dagger is a “common symbol for the male,”<sup>171</sup> it should follow that Shakespeare could scarcely resist accentuating this point<sup>172</sup> by using a ballock dagger. If, as I argue, the weapon instead enables and affirms masculine agency (sometimes instantiated through the phallus), we can track her use of Romeo’s weapon as more nuanced than a cheap visual pun. Given the way her parents

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<sup>170</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 201.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>172</sup> Pun intended.

have tried to regulate Juliet's sexuality through arranged marriage, it seems likely that she will be forced into a new marriage, should they find her still alive. If we conceive of the vagina as a sheath, a reading that Juliet insists upon, then we need to understand the opening of the vagina as asking to be closed by its "dagger," i.e., Romeo's penis. The two belong together, and heteronormative peace can only be achieved when the dagger is returned to its home. Even reading the scene as autoerotic still leads to the conclusion that Juliet's suicide is a progressive act of Romanesque autonomy through which she asserts control over her own body.

Knowing what we know about the dagger, however, allows us to understand the act as profoundly patriarchal instead; Juliet chooses death as an act of faithfulness to her husband, not to her own self-interest. Romeo should, in the traditional gender binary, be able to protect Juliet's well-being as her husband. The dagger, as a defensive weapon, illustrates Romeo's ability to preserve the structural integrity of his own body, but it also highlights his duty to enact the inviolability of Juliet's body. With Romeo dead, Juliet recognizes that her family will regain control over her bodily agency and pass her off to the next husband. By inserting Romeo's dagger into herself, she "fills" the hole with his dagger, preventing other daggers from taking its place. While Juliet asserts agency in this moment, any romantic notion of autonomy is undercut in light of the kinetic language of violence. In other words, Juliet's suicide allows her to reify the power of the patriarchy over her own body; she only exhibits agency insofar as her choice to submit to her now-dead husband supersedes her family's ability to barter her to the next man. The dagger, as a weapon of masculine agency, is placed back into its "home," Juliet's body, where it will

stay: “There rust, and let me die” (V.iii.170). Juliet’s autonomy is limited to reasserting her husband’s agency by near-literally housing it within her own body, inscribing with her wounds the precedence of her own husband’s rights over her.

We actually can see this reading confirmed by the Capulets when they enter the tomb. Upon finding the corpses, Old Capulet exclaims:

This dagger hath mista’en, for lo, his house,  
Is empty on the back of Montague,  
And is mis-sheathed in our daughter’s bosom. (V.iii.205)

The Capulets do not know of Romeo and Juliet’s marriage yet, and this comment highlights that fact. While Old Capulet does not intend his lamentations to carry a sexual valence, his notion that the “correct” place for Romeo’s dagger is the sheath he wears on his back (the “house”), not his daughter’s bosom, draws from the cultural notion that the dagger, as a source of masculine agency, is inappropriately placed in Juliet’s heart. Juliet is a sheath even in the eyes of her father, the only difference between his and Romeo’s objectification being that he refuses Romeo’s claim to Juliet-as-property.

After Friar Lawrence explains the situation to the couple’s parents, Montague offers to build a golden shrine to Juliet in order to honor her for being “...true and faithful Juliet” (V.iii.302). Because Juliet polices the entrances to her own body in support of her husband’s claim to them, the defiance she demonstrates to her father, which is initially described as “peevish self-willed harlotry” (IV.ii.14) becomes heroic when filtered through the accepted structure of patriarchal marriage. We see the dagger as an object meant to police the entrances of the body, and Juliet’s choice of her husband’s

dagger over her own exemplifies the normative use of masculine agency as it is instantiated through the dagger's defensive properties. On her own, a woman may choose to assert masculine agency in situations where her husband cannot, as long as that assertion re-inscribes her within the heteronormative model. Using the dagger to defend herself places Juliet's suicide in a similar situation to Peter's hypothetical duel: The dagger must stay where it belongs until the "good cause" comes along and it is necessary to defend oneself. For Peter, the assault on his honor is directed at his low status and prompts him to challenge the musicians to a duel. Meanwhile, for Juliet, the assault on her honor threatens her subservience to a now-dead husband, and she defends that husband's agency by re-sheathing his dagger in her heart, ensuring that no one after him will share ownership of her.

"Would He Were Gilt that Had It"<sup>173</sup>: The Dual Gender of Portia

If the dagger serves as an object capable of resituating masculine agency, what happens when women dress as men and carry it? In *The Merchant of Venice*, we see special attention paid to the dagger when Portia decides to dress as a man, an attention that highlights the phallic imagery of the English dagger and complicates our understanding of the gender dynamics in the play. While this treatment by no means places the play in a progressive framework, the dagger does allow Portia to negotiate the terms of her own gender in surprising ways. What the dagger in *Merchant* ultimately does is allow Portia to solidify the heteronormative model of marriage, bowing to the

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<sup>173</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). V.i.144.

patriarchy while coupling the weapon with her ring to reify heterosexist structures. Feeling as though her marriage is threatened by Antonio, Portia uses the performance of gender to make herself both a husband and a wife in an attempt to fulfill Bassanio's sexual desires and solidify her own primacy in their home. Scholarship on the play has traditionally focused on Portia's cross-dressing and legal prowess as an indication of a progressive, gender-troubling bent on Shakespeare's part, but as I shall show, Portia's masculine agency serves to reinforce patriarchal structures, rather than to transcend them.

We can clearly see Portia's attempts to reconstitute her own gender as early as Act III. While the necessities of the court case serve as a convenient reason for the costuming change, we can see a clear pleasure in the notion of performing male gender. Portia insists to Nerissa that their lovers "shall think we are accomplished / With that we lack" (III.iv.61-62). Given that the two women intend to impersonate men, it is safe to assume that the "lack" Portia expects to overcome is that of a penis. Knowing what we know about the dagger, then, allows us to enjoy Portia's joke about her use of the weapon, but to understand this joke is to recognize a complicated gender dynamic at work in the play. She explains to Nerissa that she intends to "prove the prettier fellow of the two, / And wear my dagger with the braver grace" (III.iv.64-65). To imagine Portia turning her phallic dagger to the front, as a man might wear it, is to imagine her centralizing the emblem of masculine authority as she adopts the other mannerisms and raiment of masculinity.<sup>174</sup> This particular act of asserting masculinity is, however, very

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<sup>174</sup> To see a resplendent example of how ballock daggers were worn, see *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. On the bottom left corner of the table, a man stands proudly, his phallic dagger swaying between his



fruitful, because of the semiotic nature of the dagger. When Portia centers the dagger on her belt, she replicates the behavior of the patriarchy, demonstrating not only a recognition of that power, but an ability to lay claim on and redefine it. The fact that she does not need to acquire the dagger suggests that she already owns it, and if all it takes to claim masculine agency is to rotate the object on her belt, we start to see a masculinist anxiety directed at female empowerment.

By taking the weapon to the center of her belt, Portia asserts her own privilege, not only impersonating a man, but overcoming the lack of a phallus by actually producing it. As Judith Butler explains, “To claim for the phallus the status of a privileged signifier performatively produces and effects this privilege. The announcement of that privileged signifier is its own performance... Indeed, the phallus is *not* a body part (but the whole), is *not* an imaginary effect (but the origin of all imaginary effects).”<sup>175</sup> In terms of the play, moreover, in terms of early modern sexuality writ large, we can recognize that identifying her manhood by wearing the phallic dagger “with the braver grace” offers to Portia a self-replicating form of privilege. Portia’s privilege comes from her ability to lay claim on the masculine autonomy signified by the phallus, and having that privilege allows her to function as a man (just as she does later in the play when she triumphs in the courtroom). In this figuration, then, there *can be no fundamental, biological reality* tied to Portia’s gender. In terms of both class and gender, masculinity becomes performatively instantiated by the person who lays claim on privilege by

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legs. Victoria Benedict, trans. *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry* (New York: George Braziller, 1969), F2r.

<sup>175</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 50.

naming it. By taking up the dagger, Portia gains control over her own body (in a fight, this control would be instantiated through the dagger's defensive ability to protect that body from penetration) and, in effect, reconstructs it as a masculine body.

If this figuration functions, then Portia's relationship to the phallus-as-dagger should be the same, or at least similar, to that held by a masculine figure. For Butler, the phallus is defined by its owner's fear of losing it: "if men are said to 'have' the phallus symbolically, their anatomy is also a site marked by having lost it; the anatomical part is never commensurable with the phallus itself."<sup>176</sup> She goes on to explain that "insofar as women might be said to 'have' the phallus and fear its loss... in both lesbian and heterosexual exchange... they may be driven by castration anxiety."<sup>177</sup> Therefore, if we are to read the dagger as a phallus worn on the belt to signify masculinity, we must understand the wearer as compensating for the *lack* of a penis – in Butlerian terms, "the phallus differentiates itself from the penis, where the penis becomes the privileged referent to be negated"<sup>178</sup> – or in terms that might seem familiar to the last chapter, the dagger becomes a fecund penis in the same way that the sword is frequently a fecund arm. The space that the dagger occupies, somewhere between a communication of masculine selfhood and an inorganic member can be here understood as synonymous with a phallus – and we do indeed see Portia take steps to protect this masculine autonomy from castration.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 51.

If we understand the dagger as a defensive weapon, and if we take Butler's assertion that imagining her dagger as a "man's" dagger allows Portia to construct a male body, what does Portia need this performative masculinity to defend herself from? The risk Portia feels the need to defend against is Antonio. As we see in the disguise scene, Portia, dressed as a man, receives the ring as payment for her help in freeing Antonio. Stephel Orgel has argued that Portia was Antonio's "gift" to Bassanio, within the context of a tradition involving male lovers supplying wives for their favorites. He explains that Portia reverses this debt by dressing as a man and driving a wedge in the middle of their friendship.<sup>179</sup> While I agree with Orgel's assertion that Portia's characterization addresses a patriarchal anxiety in the play, I think the fear is not addressed at women, but at men. Portia voices a fear, displaced upon her male alter-ego, that Bassanio would play the sexually submissive role to a man outside of the marriage:

...What ring gave you, my lord?  
Not that, I hope, which you received of me (V.i.184-185).

We see in this statement a complicated dynamic, one in which Portia worries about her place within her own marriage, while at the same time delivering a rather bitter opinion of Antonio. By demonstrating a masculine agency over the ring, Portia highlights her own capacity to direct traffic around her own sexuality – and that of her husband. If masculine agency is defined, as I have argued above, as the ability to maintain the boundaries of the enclosed masculine body, then the heterosexist moral tied to Portia's

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<sup>179</sup> Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77.

behavior is this: if Bassanio cannot police the boundaries of his own body, he cannot protect those of Portia's.

While we may be tempted to read Portia's agency within the marriage as remarkably progressive, we should bear in mind that she only engages in this activity because she perceives that her husband is not living within the context of his own proscribed gender role. As she puts it:

What man is there so much unreasonable,  
If you had pleased to have defended it  
With any terms of zeal, wanted the modesty  
To urge the thing held as a ceremony? (V.i.203-206)

Portia insists that Bassanio has relinquished control of her ring, though there is a clear implication here that he has allowed *himself* to be sexually dominated in the same way. Because masculine agency, as we have seen already, is tied to an ability to police the entrances to his own body within patriarchal structures, Portia is able to play on heterosexist notions of masculine autonomy to compare a breach of trust to sexual penetration. As if to drive this implication home, Portia sardonically adds that "I'll die for't, but some woman had the ring" (V.i.208). Of course, knowing what we know about the dagger and its ties to masculine bodily impenetrability, we see a bit of cruel humor happening here. Portia is, naturally, the woman who had the ring, but it is also implied that she needs to *specify* that a woman had the ring. As far as her husband knows, a man, not a woman, absconded with the jewelry.

When Portia demands the return of her ring at the end of the play, she uses heterosexist vitriol against Bassanio to reinforce her own centrality in the bedroom. As she exclaims:

I will not deny him anything I have,  
No, not my body, nor my husband's bed (V.i.227-228).

The implication, though oblique, is that the doctor will come to Bassanio's bed, though the line is unclear as to whether he will be exclusively tending to Portia's sexual urges. To emphasize her point that she must be the only partner Bassanio enjoys, she forces Antonio to relinquish the ring to her husband: "Give him this, / And bid him keep it better than the other" (V.i.255). In so doing, Portia establishes her dominance within the marriage, ensures that there will be no future sexual encounters with Antonio, and in return, reasserts her submissive position within the marriage. In some sense, Protestant notions of companionate marriage appear here as a sharing of masculine agency within the confines of marriage; both partners work together to ensure that their marriage models patriarchal definitions. Requiring Bassanio to exercise better stewardship of the ring requires him to reassert his normative place as the head of the household, policing the boundaries of his own body as well as those of his wife. The notion that masculine agency is necessarily empowering is confounded by Portia's masculine actions, despite the fact that those actions place her more directly under her husband's control. The converse notion that Bassanio is empowered by the reassertion of his headship over the household is similarly undercut by the fact that he must be forced into this position of supremacy – patriarchal agency becomes, for Bassanio, a burden rather than a blessing.

This discomfiture places Bassanio squarely into the tradition of prodigal husbands. As Jennifer Panek finds:

at the very moment that the young man was granted a position of authority as a husband and the head of a household – a position that patriarchal ideology required him to actively desire – this entanglement of relations, combined with the increased community surveillance, could cause him to experience new headship as disempowerment and loss of autonomy, and to desire nothing so much as escape.<sup>180</sup>

Despite the fortune and social stability that comes with marrying Portia, Bassanio must make a substantial sacrifice, his sexual encounters with Antonio, in order finalize the marriage. Only by submitting to his wife can Bassanio situate himself within the patriarchal power structure that dominates his world. It seems that patriarchal agency is located in one's ability to conform to patriarchal norms. As Kathryn Schwartz explains it, "Self-government is thus citational, both mimetic of and dislocated from the principles of subjugation; it performs attachment in which the terms are only speculatively governed by the source."<sup>181</sup> Self-control becomes the locus of agency in patriarchal structures for both men and women, though control is seemingly defined by the exterior forces defining social mores. Masculine agency, defined in its submission *to* patriarchy, becomes the key to enjoying the privileges bestowed *by* patriarchy.

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<sup>180</sup> Jennifer Panek, "Community, Credit, and the Prodigal Husband on the Early Modern Stage." *ELH* 80.1 (2013): 63. Accessed 9 December, 2015.

<sup>181</sup> Kathryn Schwartz, *What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 6.

“Your Grace and I / Must grapple upon even terms no more”<sup>182</sup>: The Dagger and the

### Knightly Duel in the Bedroom

Francis Beaumont’s and John Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*, a tale of dramatic courtly overreach and biting commentary directed at the notion of honor, has received its (un)fair share of negative critical attention over the last few decades. One thing that has gone surprisingly unnoticed is that the play came out within months of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* – another play in which a king is murdered in his bed by a subject who wields a pair of daggers. I shall close this chapter with a discussion of *Macbeth*, but it is important to bear in mind that the political forces surrounding the play (particularly criticism of King James’ unconventional sexual escapades) would have been in the background of many playgoers’ minds as they saw such a powerful – and specific – version of regicide enacted multiple times in the London playhouses. The dagger’s ties to political assassinations was carried over from Italy; the stiletto – a long, thin-bladed dagger was made expressly for murder, or, as Oakeshott coyly points out, they are “not exactly honorable weapons.”<sup>183</sup> To understand masculine agency in the way our examples have shown us so far is to assume heteronormative sexuality, and whether these plays comment directly or obliquely on James’ sexual activities, the invective against “openness” clearly entrenches the dagger in an embodied space that requires masculine agency to construct and reassert the boundaries of the smooth, masculine body.

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<sup>182</sup> Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid’s Tragedy*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, eds. David Bevington et al. (New York: Norton, 2002). V.i.36-37.

<sup>183</sup> Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour*, 231.

In *The Maid's Tragedy*, Evadne uses a pair of ballock daggers to kill the king, who has been forcing her to share his bed and use her husband, Amintor, as a wittol/smokescreen for their indiscretions. While it may be easy to view the act of regicide in the play as dishonorable, the ballock daggers show us that Evadne uses early modern notions of feminine honor in conjunction with still-extant models of honor duels among males as a justification for her actions. For instance, Barbara J. Baines argues that "Evadne forces the truth upon Amintor in order to preserve her perverted sense of honor. Melantius in turn forces Evadne to admit [to her adultery], repent, and kill the king – all for the purpose of preserving his own equally perverted sense of honor."<sup>184</sup> Most of Baines' argument, however, is based on Amintor's rejection of Evadne's actions at the end of the play. I shall argue that Evadne relies on historical precedent and early modern notions of embodiment in her decision to kill the king; she is justified based on the period's notions of honor, which in turn suggests that Amintor, not Evadne, is the object of Beaumont and Fletcher's criticism. The play clearly employs a model of masculine agency that does not depend on characters' biological sex. We are invited to empathize with Evadne because she insists on a patriarchal model of marriage; her resistance to the king's advances is laudable because it asserts a masculine agency that preserves the boundaries of her body. At the same time, it is clear that this policing of her body is only acceptable because an affair with the king disrupts patriarchal monogamy; an early modern audience would expect no such resistance to her own husband. The early scenes in the play, in which Evadne refuses to have sex with Amintor on their wedding night,

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<sup>184</sup> Barbara J. Baines, "The Complexities of Honor in *The Maid's Tragedy*." *The Journal of General Education* 31.3 (1979): 166. Accessed 3 August, 2015.



clearly seek to evoke this sort of uneasiness before Evadne reveals that the king has been raping her. In the early modern period, sexual consent required what Herrup describes as “free and specific acquiescence,” but wives’ consent to their husbands was always inferred.<sup>185</sup> The line between rebellious feminine agency and conformist masculine agency is therefore a tortuous one in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, and it is upon that difficult line that the ballock dagger imprints its negotiation of patriarchal authority.

The ballock dagger is not directly named in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, but we can assume that it is the one Evadne chooses for two reasons. First, as I have already mentioned, it was the most common choice in England when the user was not combining the rapier and dagger. Second, and more directly, there is a visual pun in the play that strongly suggests the phallic weapon. When Evadne kills the king, his gentlemen of the bedchamber suspect the two are coupling, and so they do not immediately enter the room to investigate the noises. When she calmly exits the room, the gentlemen agree to rape her at a later date (“We’ll have a snap at / her one of these nights, as she goes from him.”<sup>186</sup>) and then enter to attend the king. When they find him in bed, they are unable to tell if he is dead or drifting in post-coital languor. They investigate, and their first observation is that he is “stiff,” (V.i.125) and upon further examination discover that he is “wounded / and dead” (V.i.125-126). While a casual read of the scene would suggest that the stiffness refers to rigor mortis, we must recall that early modern audiences would have known that that particular stiffening would not take place for several hours – and

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<sup>185</sup> Herrup, *Gross Disorder*, 28.

<sup>186</sup> V.i.116-117

besides, the king's wounds and death are secondary and tertiary observations respectively. Reading their forensic misadventure in light of the dagger's phallic shape, however, allows us to recognize a bawdy pun at the expense of the bumbling aristocrats. Given that they expect the king to have been enjoying Evadne, we can deduce that the two men understandably mistake the phallic dagger jutting out of the king's stomach for his erect penis before seeing the blood and the wound.

Knowing that the daggers Evadne uses to kill the king are ballock daggers actually helps us to understand the murder in the same context as an honor duel. Jennifer Low explains that an honor duel consists of four parts: "a challenge, oral or written; a challenger; a defendant; and a combat."<sup>187</sup> Interestingly, the murder in *The Maid's Tragedy* conforms to this model. Evadne gives the king the challenge just before she kills him:

...Thou art a shameless villain,  
A thing out of the overcharge of nature,  
Sent like a thick cloud to disperse a plague  
Upon weak, catching women – such a tyrant  
That for his lust would sell away his subjects,  
Ay, and heaven hereafter. (V.i.91-96)

In Low's model, based on Vincentio Saviolo's treatise on fencing, this would constitute a challenge. Evadne is positioning herself as the "defendant" of the duel, as she has suffered a wrong. In this model, if the king acknowledges his misdoings, she can profess his depravity, but the duel cannot commence. Fortunately for the theatre audience, the

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<sup>187</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 11.

king instead rejects this accusation based on his authority: “Thou soul of sweetness, hear! I am thy king” (V.i.97). As Saviolo points out: “Now, when an injury is offered by deed... Wherewith, Seius, offended, saith unto Caius that he hath used violence towards him... Whereunto Caius answereth, ‘Thou liest,’ whereby Seius is forced to challenge Caius and to compel him to fight, to maintain the injury he hath offered him.”<sup>188</sup> We can herein see the necessary steps to initiating a duel completed between the king and Evadne. Evadne recognizes his sexual domination of her as an act of violence against her person, challenges his authority to force her into his bed, and he insists upon his right to her body within the context of his authority as king.

While we may be able to see this stabbing as a duel, we would be right to question whether this duel constitutes a fair fight, given that the king is not only unarmed but tied down to the bed. To understand the bedroom duel in its historical context, we must turn to the knightly honor codes explained in Hans Talhoffer’s fifteenth-century manuscript on knightly dueling. In the *Fechtbuch*, Talhoffer shows that a duel between a woman and man requires the man to handicap himself. In Talhoffer’s example, the man is required to stand up to his waist in a pit which he cannot leave.<sup>189</sup> While not directly analogous, we can understand the bedroom stabbing as less aberrant in an early modern context than it might first appear.

The dagger’s phallic handle offers us the last piece of evidence regarding the rightness of Evadne’s actions against the king. Given the king’s sexual violation of

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<sup>188</sup> Vincentio Saviolo, *His Practice*. (London: John Wolfe, 1595), R4V. Spellings and print conventions modernized.

<sup>189</sup> Talhoffer, *Medieval Combat*, Plates 242-250.

Evadne, we can understand the phallic dagger as an example of early modern retributive “eye for an eye” justice. The offending member in matters of state is often used metaphorically in the punishment. Decapitations have provided critical mileage in this regard, and Catherine Rowe has even pointed out that hands could serve this punitive function (as was the case in the inflammatory pamphleteer, John Stubbes, whose hand was removed in theatrical fashion at the behest of Elizabeth I). Rowe asserts that the use of dismembered body parts in this way serves a “descriptive as well as analytic” function.<sup>190</sup> In that sense, placing the object of masculine agency into the king’s body as Evadne does reasserts the lack of containment the king has expressed in a similar way to dismemberment. Remembering Butler’s assertion that the phallus signifies without necessarily being synonymous with its object, by placing the phallus into the king, Evadne reinstates his masculine agency through the murder while simultaneously implying that it was lost. In effect, Evadne employs the mechanical actions of masculine authority in order to redistribute patriarchal authority to its proper origins.

Evadne’s suicide with the other dagger further highlights the ties between the ballock dagger and masculine agency. Evadne leaves the room, dripping with blood and carrying the extra dagger,<sup>191</sup> in hopes of finding Amintor and resuming their marriage as if nothing had happened. She arrives just as Amintor is stabbing the disguised Aspatia,

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<sup>190</sup> Katherine A. Rowe, “Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.3 (Autumn 1994): 284. Accessed 1 July, 2013.

<sup>191</sup> In the text, Amintor calls Evadne’s weapon a “knife,” but I feel strongly enough about the visual pun in the bedchamber scene (and the fact that mismatching a knife and a dagger would needlessly complicate the actors’ job) to assert that the term knife is used here to preserve the meter, not to describe the weapon. The terms were loose enough that, while they generally referred to specific objects, they were sometimes mixed. Some swords were even called “long knives,” as we see in Talhoffer’s manual.

his first love, in a duel. Evadne enters, asking Amintor “Am I not fair? / Looks not Evadne beautiful with these rites now” (V.iii.116-117). Evadne thinks, incorrectly, that her decision to take the onus on herself to kill the king will win Amintor’s respect and save their marriage. We can read this moment without having to assume that the murder has broken her sanity; we have seen examples of women laying claim on this sort of agency in order to reestablish patriarchal control over their bodies before now (consider, for instance, the violent masculine agency of the eponymous heroine in Euripides’ *Medea*, who kills her children as an act of revenge).

This moment is unique, however, because Amintor is wholly unable to accept Evadne’s decision to kill the king. Half the characters in the play have been working to stop the king’s abuse of power, but the warrior Amintor has second-guessed himself into inaction; the breach of patriarchy in the play starts in Amintor’s hands, while Evadne’s actions may be seen as more corrective of the king’s heterodoxy and her husband’s inability to protect her. Throughout the text, Amintor is regularly categorized as a powerful, manly warrior, but he is also young to the point of precocity. The play starts by establishing Melantius as the litmus test for traditional masculinity, and once his worthiness is established, the man-among-men begins to praise Amintor: “Wonder not that I call a man so young my friend” (I.i.47). Amintor’s prowess in war places him into a position of considerable influence, and that is part of the reason why the king arranges Amintor’s marriage to Evadne in the first place, but Amintor also fits well into the “immature male” stereotype, which may explain his reticence to fight the king himself.

When Evadne shows herself to be more willing to defend her own honor than her husband is, Amintor is shamed, but the noncommittal way he handles the situation further highlights for the audience the dangers of masculine indecisiveness. His unwillingness to claim the masculine agency necessary to defend his wife ultimately destroys her. Amintor dismisses Evadne's action (in contrast to his own inaction) with a derisive shot at women: "I dare not stay; / There is no end of woman's reasoning. *Leaves her*" (V.iii.165-166). Despite all of her sacrifice and personal risk, Evadne's actions cannot appease the immature Amintor, and the sudden exit likely seems very strange to the audience; it certainly seems abrupt and out of place to the reader. Evadne kills herself with the dagger, still tragically devoted to her unworthy husband: "Evadne, whom thou hat'st, will die for thee" (V.iii.169). In killing herself for Amintor's hate, Evadne reasserts the primacy of his will over her body, reinforcing patriarchal structures and, like Juliet, housing the emblem of masculine authority within her own body. Amintor's re-entry in the next line demonstrates that Evadne's faith in his masculinity is misplaced, tinging his claim that women's reason is misguided with a degree of tragic irony. Evadne's willingness to subvert her will to his own shows a remarkable lack of reason, but it does so in a way that reestablishes the need for strong patriarchal leadership, a leadership Amintor is unprepared to assert. Returning in an attempt to stop her from killing herself, he finds that she has already acted on the suicidal impulse. Evadne explains that "Thy hand was welcome, but it came too late" (V.iii.172).

Amintor's hand comes to resemble his inability to take the lead and defend his wife. His lack of resolution causes Evadne's utter destruction, and even when he attempts

to kill himself in shame for his own inaction, he cannot do so. “There’s man enough in me to meet the fears / That death can bring,” he says, “and yet would it were done” (V.iii.183-184). As we watch Amintor stand feebly over Evadne’s dead body, the phallic dagger still jutting from her chest, we see that there is, in fact, no man in Amintor whatsoever. His lack of action, and his inability to police properly the boundaries of his wife’s body destroys her. Because his masculine agency is located in his wife, and not himself, he even fails to process her death in a way that is satisfying to the audience. Even now, he lacks the insight to see his own inadequacies; the audience is denied the expected Roman suicide for nearly fifty lines while Amintor attempts to resuscitate Aspatia’s corpse and escape with her, rather than seeing to Evadne. This moment does not undercut Evadne’s death, however; it emphasizes the need for masculine constancy to police feminine agency. Aspatia’s death has been brought about because Amintor broke faith with her in order to marry Evadne, and now Evadne lies unceremoniously dead while Amintor tries to bring back his other lover. Despite his insistence to Evadne that “I loved thee once,” (V.iii.165) only after wasting effort punching<sup>192</sup> and blowing air into Aspatia’s corpse does he finally kill himself in grief, so that he might “be with thee, love” (V.iii.242). While we may be tempted to see *The Maid’s Tragedy* as a warning against placing too much faith in hegemonic patriarchy, the daggers show us that one of the morals of the play is that men must be strong and decisive, even in the face of tyranny, if they ever hope to protect and preserve the boundaries of leaky, feminine bodies. As for the eponymous “maid” (or, more rightly, “maids”) of the play, it seems both Aspatia and

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<sup>192</sup> Indeed, punching: “I’ll chafe her temples” (V.iii.228)

Evadne have loved well, but not wisely. As Catherine Belling has shown in her discussion of *The Rape of Lucrece*, “when the body politic requires bleeding, the problem lies in identifying which bodies are superfluous, which constitute dangerous plethora, and which, in being breached, might become infectious.”<sup>193</sup>

In *The Maid's Tragedy*, Amintor's corpse proves to be the infectious one, and the disorder is dysfunctional masculinity; when Melantius discovers the bodies, he ignores the women (one of whom is his own sister) in order to fawn over Amintor. Melantius, at the beginning of the play a man who defines masculinity in the text, now displays the wavering effeminacy of his protégé, Amintor. His emotions are unstable and misdirected. He insists that he cannot shed tears (V.iii.251), then does so immediately after (V.iii.254). Diphilus even points out Melantius' inability to prioritize his own grief: “Here lies your sister slain! You lose yourself / In sorrow there” (V.iii.263-264). Despite these protestations, Melantius attempts to stab himself and join his friend and sister, but is stayed by the other men: “Fie, how unmanly was this offer in you” (V.iii.278). This exclamation seems to be enough to remind Melantius that masculine agency comes from policing the boundaries of the body, and he concocts a new suicide that will fit with his patriarchal role:

...I will never eat,  
Or drink, or sleep, or have to do with that  
That may preserve life! This I swear to keep. (V.288-290)

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<sup>193</sup> Catherine Belling, “Infectious Rape, Therapeutic Revenge,” in *Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, eds. Stephanie Moss and Kaara Peterson, 127.



By choosing to preserve the boundaries of the body to an extreme degree, Melantius redefines his suicide as an act of masculine hyper-containment, instead of stabbing himself and thereby penetrating his outer shell. While we have seen many examples of the dagger used for masculine, Romanesque suicides, in this play we see that stabbing oneself only functions as an acceptable form of suicide when the subject is attempting to reacquire a lost sense of agency. Because Melantius insists upon retaining agency over the boundaries of his body, the men of the play seem pleased with his altered suicide plan. At least, no one attempts to talk him out of starving himself. This suggests to us that the other men consider the danger of infection that Amintor's intemperance poses to the body politic has been stayed. Melantius' death is acceptable as long as it preserves the heteronormative structure of masculine autonomy, aligning his death with that of the nearly-forgotten Evadne, rather than that of Amintor.

#### The "Dagger of the Mind" and the Minion on the World Stage

Unlike *The Maid's Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* references the phallic dagger that I have been discussing by name. Given what we have seen in Beaumont's and Fletcher's play, which was performed at roughly the same time, it should come as no surprise that the same dagger appears in Shakespeare's play. Particularly important, however, is that this dagger appears in one of the most critically observed speeches in the play, and recognizing the historical context of the ballock dagger helps us see the gender dynamics of the play, a hotly debated topic, more clearly. As Macbeth hallucinates (or is haunted by) his dagger of the mind, he makes a fascinating claim:

...I see thee still;  
And on thy blade and dudgeon, gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before (II.i.45-47).<sup>194</sup>

The word “dudgeon” was an alternative term for the ballock dagger, one that Oakeshott connects to Shakespeare and singles out as common in early modern plays.<sup>195</sup> Despite Oakeshott’s assertion that Shakespeare favors the term, throughout the Shakespearean canon, the word appears only here, in *Macbeth*. As much as any play can “be about” anything, *Macbeth* is a play about overreach. In hegemonic patriarchy, the phallus becomes the symbol of masculine agency, as we have seen with both Portia and Evadne, and so the presence of the phallic dagger in this play highlights an aberration from the status quo, sexualized in terms that only a weapon can speak. If the dagger is about defense, as we have seen in the above examples, it prevents others from disrupting the unity of the body. In *Macbeth*, a play so heavily invested in powerful people failing to control those beneath them, the presence of a phallic weapon like the dudgeon highlights the limits of masculine control and the danger that ensues when that control is usurped by those who are not meant to have it.

The most important dagger in *Macbeth*, of course, is only described; it is the imaginary dudgeon from the play’s central speech. By examining both the shape and orientation of the “dagger of the mind,” we can understand the power relations in the play as overtly gendered. It can, of course, be difficult to describe the position of an invisible weapon, but in a play especially invested in darkness and obfuscation, we find a notably

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<sup>194</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth* (London: Methuen Drama, 1984).

<sup>195</sup> Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armor*, 228.

detailed description of the spectral weapon's positioning. Macbeth explains that the dagger "marshall'st me the way that I was going," (II.i.42) which suggests that the dagger is pointed toward Duncan's room. If the dagger is turned toward Duncan, as though beckoning Macbeth to his room, then the phallic hilt is pointed back at Macbeth. The direction of this weapon becomes important to our understanding of the scene (and the play, by extension), because the arrangement of the two men and the dagger represents the proper arrangement in the power relationship between king and servant. The dagger is arranged in the same configuration as it would be if Duncan wore it on his belt; the blade roots the masculine authority that the dagger represents at the king's side, and the phallic handle points out, aimed at his servants, suggesting Duncan's bodily unity while implying his ability to penetrate others. Alan Bray explores the master-servant relationship in early modern England as a sexualized extension of the power dynamic inherent in the class system. The sexual availability of vassals was "common... to the extent that this seems to have been a widespread institution."<sup>196</sup> The phallic hilt pointed at Macbeth reinforces that he is expected to assume a submissive position next to the king, even at the cost of his bodily penetrability. As Macbeth explains earlier, the good servant "should against his murderer shut the door, / Not bear the knife myself" (I.vii.15-16). When Macbeth uses his actual dagger, which we may assume matches this apparitional dagger from his assertion that it is "in form as palpable / As this which now I draw," (II.i.40-41) he will draw it in the traditional icepick grip, averting the phallic hilt over his shoulder and renegotiating his relationship to the king through an act of regicide. The

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<sup>196</sup> Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 49.

phallic hilt of his weapon, symbolic of masculine agency, will pass his face, over his shoulder, averting the penile shape away from Macbeth's face. By drawing the weapon from its sheath, Macbeth metaphorically uproots the symbol of masculine agency, disrupting the acceptable power dynamics that preexist his treason. He penetrates the king, inverting the relationship between monarch and thane and wresting control of Scotland by overriding the king's agency with his own.

Recognizing the inversion of power in the play is hardly groundbreaking, but what we must recognize about the dagger of the mind is that here is another example of Macbeth misreading the signs of destiny. Just as he misinterprets the witches' prophecies at the end of the play, Macbeth misreads the "intentions" of the dagger. Because he needs a justification for killing Duncan, Macbeth understands the dagger to be calling him into the room with the king, but as I have shown throughout this chapter, the dagger is meant to be a weapon of defense, not offense. What makes the dagger appropriate are the ways in which it can help the user preserve the unity of his or her body without offering an undue, aggressive, agency. Usually, the dagger helps the user maintain his or her position in the social order without overreaching. In fact, the term "dudgeon" is explicitly important for a play set in Scotland for this very reason. The Scottish iteration of the ballock dagger was always called a dudgeon, and it had a feature that made it unique from English daggers of the same description. Oakeshott suggests that, between 1590 and 1630, Scottish dudgeons always followed a "more or less uniform" design.<sup>197</sup> The

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 228. Oakeshott explains that the origin of the term is unclear; some etymologies, involving various types of wood used in the hilts, etc. have proven inconclusive.

defining characteristic of Scotland's version of these daggers was a motto, generally in English or Lowland Scots, with an emphasis on God and "defense." For instance, one exemplary motto reads "Be my defens God me defend forever more."<sup>198</sup> Such motto-inscribed daggers were a common tool of Stuart propaganda: one of the surviving examples actually belonged to King James himself and bears a Latin inscription coupled with his Latinized initials (I.R. for *Iacobus Rex*).<sup>199</sup> The dagger is meant to remind Macbeth of his duty in defending Duncan, but Macbeth decides to murder him instead. The dagger is clean when Macbeth spies it, but when he draws his own dudgeon in order to kill the king, the phallic dagger begins to bleed:

such an instrument I was to use...  
 And on thy blade, and dudgeon, gouts of blood,  
*Which was not so before* (II.i.46-47).<sup>200</sup>

When Macbeth decides to murder the king, the handle of the weapon begins to spurt blood. The dagger of the mind is not only a spectral object floating through the air. The hilt of the weapon, shaped like a man's genitals, is bleeding, which suggests that it is a *menstruating* phallic object. The fact that the blood is emanating from an organ of generation, coupled with its excessive, uncontrolled nature, situates the bleeding dagger within a literary tradition of male menstruation. David Biale argues that menstruation is viewed negatively in Western society not because of its origins in the female body, but because it is not properly contained: "the blood of menstruation and childbirth," he

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>200</sup> Italics mine.

explains, “is associated with pollution because it is *uncontrolled* bleeding.”<sup>201</sup> As it turns out, reading the bleeding dagger in Macbeth’s mind as a menstruating phallus would be highly conventional in the racialized and gendered writings of Shakespeare’s day. For instance, Biale cites Johannes Eck as one of many sources in which early modern Europeans claimed that Jewish men menstruated. He points out that this belief was tied to the notion that killing Christ, an act of deicide, cursed them to bleed on a monthly basis.<sup>202</sup> It is also worth mentioning that medieval and early modern religious doctrine sometimes identified the mind as a uterus that was responsible for birthing good deeds. For instance, Ambrose of Milan (337-397 A.D.) conceived of the process of Christian conversion as an act of giving birth: “there are some who have Christ in their uterus but never give him forth.”<sup>203</sup> Perhaps Macbeth’s bleeding phallic dagger of the mind demonstrates that he is not “pregnant” with holy thoughts, but rather menstruates with his own malevolence. Recognizing the phallic nature of the dagger allows us to see that the dagger is not actually telling Macbeth the same things he thinks it is. He thinks the weapon is leading him toward the murder, but it is, in fact, warning him of the effeminizing effects of regicide. Paster asserts that women were thought to produce excess blood – the menses – primarily because their blood was of a lower quality than that of men, requiring an excess to meet the needs of the body.<sup>204</sup> This idea implies that Macbeth’s menstruating dagger denotes a corruption of his biological makeup. To

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<sup>201</sup> David Biale, “Does Blood Have Gender in Jewish Culture?,” *Tessera* 33-34 (2000): 19. Accessed 10 August, 2015.

<sup>202</sup> David Biale, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol Between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 105.

<sup>203</sup> Qtd. in Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 61.

<sup>204</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 80-81.

commit regicide is to change the makeup of one's body – a change that is coded explicitly as negative. By pulling the phallus-shaped weapon from his sheath, Macbeth metaphorically pulls the plug from bodily unity, and the uncontrolled bleeding serves as a visual marker for his uncontrolled actions in unseating of the state.

The treasonous act places both men into a feminized position in a different way – treason, in an early modern patriarchal context, makes “women” of us all. Kathryn Schwartz describes feminine subservience in patriarchal structures as a “livable space,” explaining that women can live within a patriarchal structure and retain agency – or, as she puts it, “hierarchy disguises mutuality.”<sup>205</sup> Observing the daggers in this context takes us one step farther. We see masculine agency as compliance with the patriarchy, while the early modern model of feminine agency is inherently treasonous. This suggests, in turn, that Schwartz's “livable space” is, in fact, masculine agency, despite the biological sex of the subject. *Macbeth* puts so much pressure on the notion that masculine agency is an inherently male trait that, when he argues with his wife about whether they should kill or protect Duncan, he uses the assertion that he does “all that may become a man” (I.vii.46) as evidence that he exercises proper masculine agency by restraining his murderous tendencies. In this light, the comment that “who dares do more, is none” (I.vii.47) negates the masculine agency of the person who overreaches his or her station. Put another way, feminine agency becomes equivalent to treason, and noncompliance with patriarchy is refigured as a feminizing state of being. Men are encouraged to “manfully” step in line with the normative behaviors that patriarchy proscribes.

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<sup>205</sup> Schwartz, *What You Will*, 3.

“I do all that may become a man” - Lady Macbeth and the Bloody Britches

Of course, any discussion about the gendered inversions in *Macbeth* must discuss the marriage between Macbeth and his wife. Lady Macbeth has to direct the traffic of the daggers back to the framed guards. Macbeth's attempt to lay claim on the king's agency in the “dagger of the mind” speech demonstrates that he is inadequate for the job. He wears, as he puts it earlier, “borrowed robes” (I.iii.109). His inability to clutch the weapon clearly shows the moral turpitude of using this defensive weapon to murder. Lady Macbeth, as with other women under discussion in this chapter, has a unique facility with managing daggers. The defensive qualities of the dagger are uniquely suited to her socialization as a female, and in the case of Macbeth himself, he only knows how to use the blades for offensive purposes. In fact, this might help us understand why he forgets to plant the daggers on the groomsmen. It is safe to assume that most of us consider this oversight to be an effect of the powerful damage the murder does to Macbeth's psyche. If we look at the interaction between daggers and gender narratives, however, we might recognize Macbeth's failure to leave the daggers behind as a function of his aggressive masculinity. Having misused a weapon designed so explicitly for defense that it bears an inscription asking for protection, he likewise does not understand what to do with it after the misuse. Lady Macbeth, unlike her husband, recognizes the couple's need to protect themselves: “Why did you bring these daggers from the place? / They must lie there” (II.ii.47-48). When Macbeth refuses to return the weapons, it is his wife that takes the daggers back to cover their guilt. The gendered moment in which Lady Macbeth frames the groomsmen fits within early modern gendered conventions so well



that we hardly notice it (given that she refuses to participate in the murder, it actually should seem strange to us that she has no problem bathing the daggers in the king's blood, but it does not). The need to defend herself empowers Lady Macbeth to do what even her war-seasoned husband cannot. In turn, we see an inversion of our usual understanding of early modern gender roles. Lady Macbeth's ability to assert masculine agency does not offer a univalent counter to masculine authority by the period's standards. While we witness Macbeth's masculinity challenged throughout the events of the play, Lady Macbeth's self-assertions provide direct benefits to the murder plot, at least in its early stages, because she exerts a feminine agency in a system where female agency is defined against masculine normativity through acts of treason.

Lady Macbeth's relationship with the daggers is more explicitly gendered, primarily because of how she plays on early modern notions of biologically determined gender directly with the famous "unsex me here" speech. While her preparations for the treason are described as a rejection of femininity, the actual behaviors she exhibits are profoundly conventional from the perspective of early modern hegemonic patriarchy. Looking at the daggers allows us to recognize her challenge to patriarchal authority as expressly feminine, rather than an aberration against womanhood. After all, why should men seek to control their wives if women are self-policing? Lady Macbeth attacks Macbeth's initial reticence to commit the murder based on his failures as a man: "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I.vii.49). Here, she is not referencing his masculinity per se, but rather his failure to claim the masculine agency implied in early modern notions of "man's estate." Lady Macbeth insists that her husband could be "So

much more the man,” (I.vii.51) if only he would execute their murderous plan. Despite the fact that violence could, in an early modern context, “confer authority on its perpetrators,”<sup>206</sup> Macbeth challenges his wife’s violent paradigm of masculine agency (despite his military history): “I dare do all that may become a man” (I.vii.46). As with Evadne and Portia, Macbeth’s failure to conform to early modern standards of masculine temperance empowers his wife to do what he will not.

The dungeons in *Macbeth* demonstrate that masculine agency can be situated in both men and women, just as long as it is used to reassert patriarchal authority, while feminine agency is inherently a caustic agent. In an early modern context, women can become males when men fail to be men, as we have seen in *Haec Vir*. It is not surprising that the act of murder committed by the Macbeths is connected to the dagger through a shared image, and perhaps even less surprising that the image being challenged is an explicitly masculine one: in this case, there is a recurring theme in the play tied to poorly-fastened pants. What is interesting, however, is that this image is not centered on Macbeth, but on his wife. Lady Macbeth criticizes Macbeth’s waffling using clothing metaphors: “Was the hope drunk, / Wherein you dress’d yourself” (I.vii.35-36). The notion of dressing oneself to prepare for a murder is hardly unconventional, given phrases such as “girding one’s loins” to prepare for war. Centering our attention on the dagger, however, shows us how Shakespeare uses the convention to highlight what happens when masculine agency is subverted. When Lady Macbeth goes to spread Duncan’s blood around, she describes it metallically – “I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal” (II.ii.55) –

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<sup>206</sup> Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 140.

but when the evidence is collected, we see the clothing metaphor return. Macbeth explains that he found the servants next to “their daggers / Unmannerly breech’d with gore” (II.iii.113-114). We can certainly see the blood as a kind of pants, and the use of the word “breech’d” here is useful for a gendered reading of the comment, as breeches are explicitly masculine. The murderer, according to Macbeth, put pants made of blood on the daggers. Remembering, however, the phallic nature of the daggers, offers us another avenue for understanding of the weapons. The phallic hilts of the daggers stick out of the carnage like a penis escaping poorly fastened breeches. In this dark pun, Macbeth highlights the masculine agency (placing blame on the groomsmen, not his wife) at work in the breeching, and he also highlights the *inappropriateness* of the whole situation. The murder becomes a violation not only of the king’s agency, but a rejection of the rules of “mannerly” conduct. The fact that it was actually Lady Macbeth who went back to spread the blood around highlights the way in which she takes control of the family unit when her husband fails to do so. The drunken hope with which Macbeth dresses himself highlights his own inability to “wear the pants,” and with her husband unwilling to take the lead, Lady Macbeth lays claim on that authority (not unlike Evadne) and dresses the daggers herself.

Macbeth’s inability to frame the groomsmen for the murder demonstrates his disavowal of his own masculine agency. The imaginary blood that manifests in both characters’ guilty consciences through the rest of the play comes to represent the heinous nature of the deed Macbeth has performed. Lady Macbeth’s ability to negotiate the daggers in such a way that she can “gild the faces of the grooms withal,” (II.ii.55)

however, shows her facility with an excess of blood. This moment highlights two aspects of femininity in the early modern imagination. First, as with Juliet's sheathing of the dagger, Macbeth knows how to use the dagger itself, but Lady Macbeth's competence is with putting it back up again. Second, given that the blood operates the same way as effeminizing, excessive menstruum, we can understand this moment as Lady Macbeth taking control of blood: her area of experience. As Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford have argued, menstruation was not a subject "fit for mixed company...women's bonds were strengthened by their shared bodily experiences."<sup>207</sup> In fact, even the notorious, sexually forward physician Simon Forman brought in a midwife, Mrs. Whip, when he had to deal with matters related to menstruation.<sup>208</sup> Given the distinctly feminine nature of menses, we can read Lady Macbeth's careful choice of wording in this specifically medicalized context; she will paint the daggers and the groomsmen with blood only "if he do bleed" (II.ii.54). Duncan and Macbeth both experience an excess of bleeding as a result of Macbeth's actions; both are unmanned in the same way that Lady Macbeth hopes to be unsexed by the dark spirits a few scenes earlier. Lady Macbeth's facility with the daggers is tied to her ability to defend herself without her husband's help, but these leaky, menstruating daggers become even further entrenched in her own domain because of her own leaky, feminine body. Far from being unsexed, Lady Macbeth occupies a persistently feminine space, one which her husband and the king are variously unable to abide.

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<sup>207</sup> Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 239.

<sup>208</sup> Barbara Howard Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41.

“An inle for the players”: The Theatre and Gender in King James’ England

To see two highly gendered texts such as *Macbeth* and *The Maid’s Tragedy* take the English stage at roughly the same time with representations of regicide is to recognize that the English stage was commenting, however obliquely, on the current state of the monarchy. Stephen Orgel describes two separate audiences for the public and court theatres. In the court, he explains, “The primary audience was the monarch, and the performance was often directed explicitly at him.”<sup>209</sup> In the public theatre, however, he states that the drama was “purely directed at satisfying middle-class aspirations.”<sup>210</sup> If this is true, we may seek in these plays some commentary on James’ reign that was not meant for James at all, but rather offers a criticism that would resonate with its intended audience. While Leeds Barroll has argued that we should be careful about dating plays based on topical allusions tied to historical events (specifically citing *Macbeth* as dangerous territory),<sup>211</sup> even if there is more chronological distance between the two tragedies, they still comment upon the gendered ways in which agency is expressed. Therefore, I make the following assertions advisedly.

Troubling patriarchal authority in early modern England was virtually the same process as transgressing gendered lines. These transgressions smacked, to the English audience, of violating the Great Chain of Being. Alan Bray has pointed out that in molly houses, sites of male prostitution that employed transvestitism, the “society of the molly

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<sup>209</sup> Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 9.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>211</sup> Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare’s Theatre: The Stuart Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 134-135.

houses did not follow class lines but rather tended to dissolve them.”<sup>212</sup> Meanwhile, the theatre, as a highly visible locus of cross-dressing, became a space for negotiating the same boundaries. As Jean E. Howard says, “even in the late 1570s, antitheatricalists had attacked crossdressing by boy actors, and often these attacks had spilled over into the denigration of women who dressed mannishly or above their station.”<sup>213</sup> The fear of this transgression was tied to “the threat of female sexual incontinence.”<sup>214</sup> Meanwhile, Bray explains that “there is evidence that it was not only in the relations of actors and their patrons in the court circles that homosexuality was involved: the actors had distinctions in status of their own; some of them indeed were only boys.”<sup>215</sup> In Bray’s formulation, then, the transvestite theatre offered its audiences the sexual incontinence of the actors, a titillating opportunity to transgress classed and gendered lines. In fact, Stephen Orgel has argued that gender was notably mutable in the drama, as in society, and that characters could move fluidly across the perceived divisions represented by those lines.<sup>216</sup>

Seeing these negotiations of classed and gendered lines allows us to understand that homosexuality was not generally denigrated among English polemicists on its own terms; as with unruly women, such acts only garnered real criticism when they represented a transgression of one’s station. Cynthia Herrup points out that, while sodomy was criminalized in England, it was “among the least likely of crimes to earn

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<sup>212</sup> Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 86.

<sup>213</sup> Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 95.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>215</sup> Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 55.

<sup>216</sup> Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.

indictments.”<sup>217</sup> She later explains that “sodomy represented desire unfettered, appetite ruling the mind rather than ruled by it. Sodomy was less about desiring men than about desiring everything.”<sup>218</sup> It is in this specific context that we must understand the daggers in plays such as *The Maid’s Tragedy* and *Macbeth*.

The phallic nature of the dudgeon is, surprisingly, not explicitly sexual, despite its signification of a male sexual organ. We can, however, understand the use of such a weapon to kill as an act of sodomy, but for a different reason than the typical, sexualized one. While polemicists generally accepted that intemperance was a feminine quality, that particular model relies on a monolithic gender binary that does not appear to have been quite as historically dominant as we sometimes suspect. Shepard, for instance, “rejects approaches to male experience as the norm or standard against which female experience is judged.”<sup>219</sup> While there can be little doubt that the humoral model inscribed and encouraged a gendered binary, gender performance in the period existed on a spectrum for many. One group of men exercised an especially disproportionate privilege over others: those who had achieved what scholars refer to as “man’s estate.” Men who were not heir to “man’s estate” were available for invasions to the body that were normatively ascribed to women. Social order becomes intrinsic to the preservation of bodily unity – agency becomes control over bodily containment. Men who were not included in “man’s estate,” such as servants, unmarried men, students, and others who were too young or too old to hold masculine agency within the period’s structural heteronormative patriarchy,

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<sup>217</sup> Herrup, *A House in Gross Disorder*, 27.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>219</sup> Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 2.

were viewed as less contained than those who were.<sup>220</sup> Alan Bray has pointed out that there was a period of time in which individuals were unable to take control of a household or to marry, for instance, and that this waiting period could frequently last ten years longer for men than for women. During this time, one usually served in a household, and that social position was assumed by some to make one available for sexual penetration by those who had managed to achieve “man’s estate.” In fact, having sex with one’s male servants was frequently the less risky choice, as “for an unmarried servant homosexuality had certain advantages: it was less likely to arouse the interest of the local Justices of the Peace.”<sup>221</sup>

For those very few individuals who met the requirements for “man’s estate,” the bodies of those around them were considered more open than their own. While both the law and the church discouraged this behavior, primarily because it contravened dominant notions of masculine experience, these social norms were frequently challenged in practice. Indeed, classed inversions of power were treated with suspicion less because of the biological sex of the participants than because of the overreach of the lower classes. Social expectations were only undermined in cases where the servant was taking the dominant role. As Cynthia Herrup explains, sodomitical practices were always seen as consensual in the period.<sup>222</sup> Because of this, the scandal that sometimes came with

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>221</sup> Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 47.

<sup>222</sup> Cynthia B. Herrup, *A House in Gross Disorder: Sex, Law, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Castlehaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.



homosexual interactions primarily hinged on the notion that sodomy was an abuse of the power relations that dominated patriarchy and defined masculine friendship.<sup>223</sup>

In *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Maid's Tragedy*, and *Macbeth*, we see women use the dagger as a symbol for masculine agency and as a weapon of defense. All of these representations ultimately reify phallogentric patriarchy, but they also re-gender the bodies that use them. Lady Macbeth must control the daggers because her husband's excess, highlighted by the menstruating dudgeon, has taken him beyond his faculties into a world he cannot navigate. Her facility with treason situates her in a feminine space, despite the penile shape of the murder weapons. Meanwhile, in *The Maid's Tragedy*, Evadne inserts the dagger into the King's nether regions precisely because he has failed to contain himself. Evadne visibly plugs the king up, not unlike the way Juliet does in her suicide scene. Her masculine agency is tied to the need to reify patriarchal order. In the same way, by rotating the dagger to the center of her waist, Portia places herself in a position to meet her husband's needs as both a man and a woman. Defense in these characters is not univalently represented as preserving the unity of a contained masculine body from the outside; defense also must keep the body from crossing its own boundaries. The phallus on the hilt serves as a perfect illustration of this idea; feminine, leaky bodies are uncontrolled and uncontained like a sheath without a dagger. Paster explains that "the control of blood and bleeding exemplified by the phlebotomist's art becomes a key determinant of agency and empowerment."<sup>224</sup> If the dagger fills the gap,

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>224</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 84.

or sheath, then displacing a dagger from its rightful place leaves behind a bleeding, effeminizing hole. To control the blood and the member from which it bleeds, by contrast, is to control the limitations of the body, to reassert masculine agency, and to pay reverence to patriarchal authority.

The criticism in these plays, directed at James' court through the emblematic ballock dagger, is that the king and his courtiers exhibit an uxorious behavior toward their social inferiors.<sup>225</sup> The sodomy enacted with these daggers is an infringement upon the dagger's defensive role. In the early modern worldview, allowing one to transgress social roles is the ultimate instantiation of sodomy. A lack of masculine containment, sexual or otherwise, represents a challenge to the social contract, and that abrasion is a form of treason against the normative, patriarchal order of things. For the monarchy, failing to fulfill the masculine prerogative of kingship leads to other "unnatural" acts, represented in the plays discussed here by men who eschew masculine prerogative and women who pick up that neglected masculine agency (as performed with the ballock dagger as a defensive weapon). The real danger at work in these plays, even more than treason, is that men who fail to uphold the phallocentric patriarchy will invite unruly women into masculine spaces, subverting the carefully balanced fabric of society.

Considering Portia's behavior in *Merchant of Venice*, where she fulfills both roles in the marriage, for instance, allows us to see just how tenuous the male grasp on his station was thought to be, and this anxiety produced a prevalent idea that women were a class of potentially rebellious subjects, always nearby, but dangerous if left unchecked.

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<sup>225</sup> James kept several favorites among his coterie, spending lavish amounts of money on their upkeep.

Phyllis Rackin has pointed out that, in *Macbeth*, Macduff's wife, who stays at home, caring for the domestic sphere, is held up as a "natural" alternative to Lady Macbeth's masculinity.<sup>226</sup> Rackin astutely notes the uneasiness Shakespeare exhibits in regard to the period's increasing drive to separate male and female spaces within public/private spheres.<sup>227</sup> What that moment in the play also shows, however, is Macduff's negligence of his masculine duty to defend the home. Lady Macduff's bitter comment that her husband "loves us not: / He wants the natural touch" (IV.ii.8-9) is inspired by Macduff's failure to prioritize his patriarchal responsibilities over his fealty to the country. When she learns of the cutters' arrival, she despairingly suggests that her only remaining defense is "that womanly defence, / To say, I have done no harm" (IV.ii.77-78). Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are viewed in opposition to one another, one responding to an intemperate husband by outperforming him in the realm of a kind of feminized, treasonous agency, the other refusing that masculine agency and dying in the process. On the other hand, their husbands start to look more similar in this respect; their crime in both cases is failing to be a proper man by early modern standards of masculinity. In other words, as Alexandra Shephard puts it, patriarchal duties were inherently contradictory in the period. Husbands were to be autonomous, but they needed their wives. While strong, they were "vulnerable to their own weaknesses."<sup>228</sup>

The ballock dagger locates masculine temperance in the ability to defend and contain the boundaries of the naturalized, solid, masculine body. In one particularly

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<sup>226</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 134-135.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>228</sup> Alexandra Shephard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 77.

exemplary moment, we see these associations very plainly. Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth, John Manningham records in his diary a row that took place between Robert Cecil and the Lord Cobham. He writes that “Sir Walter Raleigh was then absent; which the Lord Cobham took in *foul dudgeon*, as if it had been the device of Sir Robert.”<sup>229</sup> In this formulation, the word “dudgeon” is practically synonymous with temperance, and “foul dudgeon” comes to mean “poor containment.” Any intemperance that comes to supplant the established order of class or gender results in a failure of masculine prerogative vis-à-vis containment, a failure that seems to have destructive consequences. In fact, failure to exercise “proper” masculine containment was further feminized as the mark of the plebian. Peter Stallybrass points out that “The enclosure of the body, the ‘cleansing’ of the orifices, emphasized the borders of a closed individuality at the same time as it separated off the social elite from the ‘vulgar.’”<sup>230</sup> To return to Orgel’s comment that the Jacobean stage expected a middle-class audience, we can read the dudgeon’s presence in plays such as *Macbeth* and *The Maid’s Tragedy* as a commentary on the court of James that serves as a lesson for the middle classes. As we see with the “fecund arm” described in Chapter Prime, the dagger becomes a tool that is both of the body and of the self.

The dagger polices the line between the interior and the exterior, and the phallic nature of its hilt naturalizes the dualism of the physical and the interior world as an inherently masculine trait. Women, as a sheath without a dagger, cannot help but be

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<sup>229</sup> Qtd. in Goodman Godfrey, *The Court of King James the First, Volume 1* (London: Richard Bentley, 1839), 15.

<sup>230</sup> Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, 125.

porous, leaky bodies, as Gail Kern Paster and others have noted. This patriarchal formulation insists upon the leadership of men, who, with the phallus that corks their bodies, have no excuse but to reject and ultimately contain the self. The perception of laxity among the members of the court serves as an object lesson, metaphorized through the drama, to the upwardly-aspiring middle class that masculine containment is the key to nobility. The ballock dagger, in effect, draws uncomfortable separations between masculine and patriarchal authority, redefining masculinity as an ability to forcibly conform the social self to patriarchal structures through acts that preserve the unity of the masculine body and invoke a troubled notion of biological sex.

CHAPTER TIERCE: “THERE SITS IMPERIOUS DEATH, KEEPING HIS CIRCUIT  
BY THE SLICING EDGE” – SABRES AND THE SHADOW OF SALADIN ON THE  
EARLY MODERN STAGE

## CHAPTER IV

### SABRES AND THE SHADOW OF SALADIN

Ian Smith construes the bodies of African characters on the early modern stage as suffering from a split identity, a state of being that owed much to the fact that prosthetic blackness, created through the use of oils, coals, or cloth, always obfuscated what was, on the inside, a white actor. As he describes, “the actual representation of Africans or Moors on the stage required prosthetic devices that articulated black identity as wholly material and insubstantial and whose radically metonymic function – the part for the whole – confirmed the symbolically partial and incomplete identity of the African set against the authentic white body beneath.”<sup>231</sup> Smith’s model relies on the early modern audience’s recognition that the actor underneath the prosthetic blackness remains white, despite any amount of theatrical trickery placed upon it. Smith’s argument becomes particularly interesting when we apply to it early modern race theory, which already saw African Moors as being blank slates waiting for European cultures to write upon them.<sup>232</sup> Smith understands the distinction as one between the body and the self:

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<sup>231</sup> Smith, “White Skin,” 34.

<sup>232</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 63.

The performing white body beneath might quite appropriately be construed as a 'native act and figure,' an icon of the true English 'soul.' The prosthetic black body, meanwhile, is disposable, a 'complement extern' that is bound in an unyielding racial dialectic where its ultimate value, ironically, is to return the gaze to the body beneath and validate 'native' whiteness.<sup>233</sup>

For Smith, understanding the division of the body and the self as a division between opposing races helps us understand the rise of the slave trade in early modern culture. For me, this understanding helps us recognize the complexly performative nature of early modern racialization, a performativity that the sword inflects through a series of complex, long-lasting cultural prejudices.

As I have argued, the fecund arm created by a sword provides a bridge between the body and the self. As Smith understands the division between superficial exteriority and internal purity as incorporate within early modern racial discourses, I see the sword as an object that challenges these notions. As Smith explains, early modern playwrights construct a racialized discourse for their characters when they divide the white actor from his Moorish prosthetic. The single body of an early modern stage Moor encompasses a complete self/other binary between the actor and the prosthetic. I agree, but I should like to add that supplying that character with a racialized sword blurs the lines between the body and the social self. The sabre, clearly aligning the user with discourses surrounding Turkish armies from the Crusades, offers playwrights an opportunity to trouble the divisions between the body and the self. The prosthetic blackness of the actor portraying a Moor will never dye the actor underneath it black in any permanent way. This prosthetic effect is safe, in a sense, because the blackness is disposable, or as Smith sees

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<sup>233</sup> Smith, "White Skin," 36.



it, a commodity to be sold (and therefore impermanent by definition). The sabre, on the other hand, shows a racialized discourse that bores its way into the social self. The sabre represents the *customs* of the Moor, rather than the *body* of the Moor, but because of the sword's function as a connective tissue between the social self and the physical body, playwrights are capable of using it to both accentuate and challenge the self-other binary that prosthetic blackness might find more comfortable. The sword supplies a way by which behavior can communicate with biology as it plays across the two contentious discourses of early modern race that are located in the body of the stage Moor. If the black coating on the skin of a white actor divides the "pure" self from the "divided" exterior, the sword collapses racialized distinctions in such a way that race becomes a system of behavior, a state of being as much as a physical characteristic. This chapter will discuss how the sabre influences our readings of racialized characters in early modern drama. I shall examine the ways that sabres employed by "othered" characters, including Aaron, from *Titus Andronicus*, and Tamburlaine, from Marlowe's *Tamburlaine I & II*, influence our understanding of the Moor's place in society. Finally, I shall examine the long performance history of Shakespeare's *Othello*, in which the main character has often carried a sabre, demonstrating how this decision is not only ahistorical, but serves as an object lesson in how our modern notions of race influence our understanding of their early modern equivalents.

## The Early Modern Sabre

In 1600, the Shah of Persia, Abbas the Great, presented a scimitar, a Mediterranean sabre, to the Russian empress Catherine the Great. Along with the distinctly curved blade common to all sabres, this sword featured 1,295 diamonds, 50 karats of rubies, and an 11-karat emerald.<sup>234</sup> This blade is one of the best examples of the kind of lavish excess the English ascribed to the Mediterranean world in the early modern period. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine, part 1* ascribes a similar sumptuousness to the Persian war machine:

Their plumed helms are wrought with beaten gold,  
Their swords enameled, and about their necks  
Hangs massy chains of gold down to the waist,  
In every part exceeding brave and rich. (1.I.ii.124-127)<sup>235</sup>

The lavishness of the Persian sabre demonstrates a clear parallel to English notions of the affluence – or flagrant luxury, depending on the observer – of the Ottomans, as demonstrated in the excerpt from *Tamburlaine*. As Daniel Vitkus has argued, persistent English commentary on the exorbitant riches of the East stemmed from a striking inferiority complex. The countries in the Mediterranean were unimaginably wealthy compared to their European counterparts, and yet their religious values and skin color provided a challenge for imperially-minded English writers, who would have a hard time conceptualizing superiority – a necessary justification for imperial ambitions – against

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<sup>234</sup> Harvey J.S. Withers and Tobias Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History of Knives, Swords, Spears & Daggers* (China: Hermes House, 2013), 482.

<sup>235</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

their actual, subordinate, place in the world.<sup>236</sup> Not surprisingly, geohumoral discourse about ethnicity derived from ancient Greece and Rome centered on Mediterranean peoples, and the newfound emphasis on these notions of ethnicity led the English to conceptualize themselves as marginalized, inferior versions of their Mediterranean counterparts.<sup>237</sup> When faced with the kind of casual decadence instantiated in objects like the Shah's scimitar, early English imperialists were up against the material proof of a more-successful civilization. Furthermore, at this point in history, the Turkish Moors offered England an opportunity to achieve their imperial goals – unlike Spain, Portugal, or France, England had much better prospects available via Mediterranean trade than they could currently hope to achieve in America.<sup>238</sup> The fact that the Ottomans were a potential ally against Catholic Europe (and therefore the lesser of two evils in an early modern English context) and that they were living the imperialist dream England had begun to entertain produced a need, according to Vitkus, to redefine alterity. In practice, the fear of "turning Turk" was the fear of a slight diversion from the normative English course, not a massive paradigm shift.<sup>239</sup>

Enter the sabre. In many ways, to discuss the racially semiotic value of sabres in the period's drama is like trying to hit a moving target with a slow-moving projectile. Both terms are problematic to the modern critic for different reasons. "Race" was a concept that, in the early modern period, was constantly being defined and redefined on a

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<sup>236</sup> Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean 1570–1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4.

<sup>237</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>238</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 6-7.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

case-by-case basis,<sup>240</sup> while the word “sabre” was not in use at all, though the specific objects it describes (scimitars, cuttle-axes, etc.) were. To say something like “The sabre is the weapon of the Moor” is to assume that “Moor” was a fixed term.<sup>241</sup> If we think of Moorishness as an indicator of race, and if we side with Jonathan Xavier Inda’s insistence that “if ‘race’ is a social function, then the meaning of ‘race,’ and hence the constitution of racial bodies, is fundamentally unstable and open to all sorts of resignifications,”<sup>242</sup> we find that the sabre is an object capable of signifying and redefining early modern concepts of Moorishness. Furthermore, modern notions of race feign scientific grounding, but secretly “dwell on impressions of differential systems of affect, psychology, and intellect, on racial analogy, and on racial fluidity.”<sup>243</sup> According to Judith Butler, seeing an indicator of race on another’s body “is a seeing which is a reading, that is, a *contestable* construal, but one which nevertheless passes itself off as ‘seeing,’ a reading which became... the same as seeing.”<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, in the period, “races were defined more in social terms of customs, language, and law.”<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Emily Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 13. Bartels points out, by way of example, our tendency to categorize racial difference as encoded in national borders, rather than racial “worlds,” as some early modern geographers did.

<sup>241</sup> The work of scholars such as Emily Bartels, Daniel Vitkus, Ania Loomba, and others have all demonstrate the slipperiness of the term during the period.

<sup>242</sup> Jonathan Xavier Inda, “Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body,” *Latino Studies Journal* 11, no. 3 (2000): 75, accessed 21 March, 2015, [http://www.academia.edu/532929/Performativity\\_Materiality\\_and\\_the\\_Racial\\_Body](http://www.academia.edu/532929/Performativity_Materiality_and_the_Racial_Body).

<sup>243</sup> Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 3.

<sup>244</sup> Judith Butler, “Endangered Endangering,” in *Reading Rodney King*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

<sup>245</sup> Ania Loomba, “‘Delicious Traffick’: racial and religious difference on early modern stages,” in *Shakespeare and Race*, eds. Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 207.

Understanding race as performative allows us to reexamine the way the sabre constructs racialized otherness. Because of their role in the Crusades, sabres like the scimitar and the curtle-ax (the two types I shall discuss in this chapter) served as clear indicators of racial difference in theory, but most of the sabres brought onto the early modern stage are used by characters who challenge the normativity of whiteness as much as they vilify Moorishness. In practice, insofar as it was associated with the term “Moor,” the semiotic value of the sabre was in a constant state of flux. This flux, I argue, is precisely why the sabre often finds itself in the hands of racially unfixed figures in the period. To see in the weapon a notion of race is not a misguided impulse, therefore, because much like the slippery term it attempts to define, the weapon itself plays into a fluid process of racialized construction. Just as the fecund arm of the sabre becomes an extension and expansion of the supposed “nature” of the Moor, so too it redistributes the early modern understanding that race and behavior were linked to one another.

To read race, says Barbara Everett, be it Spanish or Moorish, requires us to recognize it as “an actor on stage portraying the experiences of any-colored Everyman: but our interpretation of those experiences will depend on how we read the words, and what presuppositions we bring as we begin.”<sup>246</sup> Therefore, we can simultaneously acknowledge the definitions that racialized discourse employed in the period while still understanding early modern racial tensions as performance, and therefore subject to interpretation (and, as we shall see, adoption). As Carole Levin and John Watkins note,

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<sup>246</sup> Barbara Everett, “‘Spanish’ Othello: the making of Shakespeare’s Moor,” in *Shakespeare and Race*, eds. Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 73.

national English identity was not limited just to “otherness;” by this point, many of these definitions served as a critique of English folk who failed to meet ever-narrowing forms of self-expression.<sup>247</sup> Barbara Fuchs insists that we must understand European understandings of Moorish others “against the larger backdrop of a sustained and profound cultural hybridization.”<sup>248</sup> Therefore, race was not simply otherness as a state of being; race could shift through a variety of activities, attitudes, postures, costumes, and so forth. Early modern notions of race hinged upon a performance of Englishness (or otherwise), and otherness came to be defined at first through the success or failure of the performance of Englishness. Skin color always influenced the interpretation of that performance, but as Smith points out, there is always a perception undercutting racialized discourses that a white soul exists beneath the black skin.

Early modern England’s looser definition of racialization parallels the semiotic nature of the sword, then, because the choice of sword proscribes certain bodily movements, but the swordsman chooses which weapon to use. Embodiment is dictated in the moment of combat by the requirements of the weapon, but the person swinging the weapon chose that specific blade over other options. As a result, there is a complex interplay between the embodiment of race and the performance of it. The physical shaping of the body enacted by sword training becomes both license and proscription for certain types of behavior, and so embodiment is seen as reciprocal with swordsmanship. Jennifer Low explains that “The fencer develops extended corporeal parameters that

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<sup>247</sup> Carole Levin and John Watkins, *Shakespeare’s Foreign Worlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>248</sup> Barbara Fuchs, *Exotic Nation: Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 67.

structure his behavior in relation both to the opposite sex and to men lower on the social scale.”<sup>249</sup> Such a self-fashioning alters the space a body takes up, but it also defines that body in the larger social context. The body in movement becomes redefined in this sense as an instantiation of difference. Similarly, a person of one or another race may make the choice to behave more or less like English folk, but that behavior could also be influenced by their humoral makeup, an affective presentation of selfhood, or both.

### The Sabre in Context

For the purposes of this chapter, I shall define the place of the sabre in context in order to demonstrate how early modern English folk understood the sword when it appeared onstage. The actual term “sabre” does not appear in the English language until around 1680, according to the *OED*. However, using Ewart Oakeshott’s explanation of the archetypical sabre, we can start to see why they had such a close association with Moors in the period:

Swords such as these were more than likely used by the Huns; certainly their descendants used them all over Eastern Europe, southern Russia, and what is loosely called ‘the Middle East’, a region which in medieval times embraced the Byzantine Empire... We find the same sort of blade in a Macedonian monastic wall-painting of the early fourteenth century.<sup>250</sup>

The fact that European sabres shared a common ancestry with the scimitars of the Mediterranean is more than passingly significant – in a period of rapidly-expanding trade with northern Africa and central Asia, cultural interchange is the reason, as Vitkus

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<sup>249</sup> Jennifer Low, *Manhood and the Duel: Masculinity in Early Modern Drama and Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 44.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

explains, that we start to see notions of Moorishness appear in European contexts. Because Europe employed an entire family of swords that owed their existence to the Crusades (the last time such persistent international interchange had taken place between Europe and Western Asia), it is small wonder that English playwrights began to associate the distinctively curved swords with the East. The strongly geographical valences ascribed to the sabre are useful to our interpretation of early modern racialization.<sup>251</sup> Ian Smith reminds us that “The unstated center of the cartographic perspective disavows its own chromatic presence... whiteness appeared unremarkable and invisible... Modern criticism’s denial of color’s semantic and racial significance derives an ancillary benefit: where there is no blackness, no admission of criticism’s complicity with whiteness need ever be confessed.”<sup>252</sup> As Smith points out, even geographically-oriented models of race imply that there is such a thing as a center, and the implication that skin color was determined by proximity to the sun still pathologizes difference to a certain degree.

Helpful in this context is Ania Loomba’s assertion that in the period, Moorishness was as much a religious designation as a racial one; as a result, it contained a “set of attributes that can be either acquired or shed.”<sup>253</sup> In this context, sabres such as the scimitar are often affiliated with the non-Christian faiths ascribed to Moors in the period. The English fear that “turning Turk” was a simple slide into alterity often compounded with religious fears regarding Islam. The possibility of adopting the mannerisms of other

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<sup>251</sup> It is possible that Elizabeth’s surreptitious dealings with Ahmed el-Mansur, emperor of Morocco, may have been a factor in the flattening of such characters in early texts. Early modern London found the ambassador’s presence to be sensational – and substantial critical ink has been spilled speculating on the degree to which his visit influenced writers of the day. Bartels has suggested that such dealings produced racialized tenseness on the part of Elizabeth’s subjects (26).

<sup>252</sup> Smith, *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance*, 53.

<sup>253</sup> Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46.



peoples was more frightening to English purists than any skin color, and notions of race in the period reflected this idea. For instance, Dennis Austin Britton points out that “blackness is transformed into a symbol for any natural phenomenon that cannot be altered by European modes of ingenuity.”<sup>254</sup> Britton explains that religious difference became so intrinsically linked to the English self-identity that in some writers’ view, at least, “Christian” and “infidel” became separate markers of racial difference.<sup>255</sup> This understanding complicates the notion that race was either wholly biological or wholly performed in the period. The fecund nature of the sword perfectly highlights the interplay between the inner self and the outer body. As Vitkus offers, “Drama was an important medium through which the different appearances, behaviors, and beliefs of other cultures were imported, distorted, mimicked, and displayed.”<sup>256</sup> The sabre becomes a kind of barbed member of the Moor’s body in this figuration, a signal of Turkishness, though, as we shall see with Tamburlaine, it can be taken up by a Northern user as well. Because weapons are chosen objects this notion is highlighted in a common turn of phrase: a soldier can “manage” arms. We see the same word, “manage,” used by Shakespeare to describe single combat, the issue of firearms to soldiers, and the control of horses.<sup>257</sup>

These various uses sometimes characterize the management of arms as a form of control,

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<sup>254</sup> Dennis Austin Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early English Romance*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>256</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 29.

<sup>257</sup> I choose Shakespeare for this example because he applies the word in three different contexts. In *Richard II*, we see the context of managing arms when Scrope exclaims that “Yea, distaff-women manage rusty bills / Against thy seat” (III.ii.114). In *2 Henry IV*, Justice Shallow describes the method of handling a weapon as: “would manage you his piece thus” (III.ii.258). Meanwhile, in *1 Henry IV*, Lady Percy describes Hotspur’s horsemanship thusly: “Speak terms of manage to thy bounding steed” (II.iii.48). William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry IV Part 1*, (London: Thompson Learning, 2006).

while other times the user is making the best of circumstances beyond his or her control. This complicated space between organic material and hard steel becomes the locus of the sword's various interpretations. It is sometimes a possession, while at other moments, it is an extension of the arm in which it is held.

One way that sabres influenced early modern understanding of racialized difference was that they, not unlike falchions, were more brutal and direct than the majority of their analogous European counterparts (such as rapiers and tucks). European techniques for rapier fencing were actually very similar to those used with the sabre, though the sabre's extra weight and unsharpened false edge prevented certain precise maneuvers. Unlike the majority of European blades, the sabre has no mid-blade – it only has a *forte* and a *foible*.<sup>258</sup> Early modern audiences who knew their swordplay would pick up on what these limitations amounted to – a lack of subtlety of movement by comparison to the rapier. The ruthless efficiency and weight of the sabre could prove attractive in comparison to the effeminate daintiness of a rapier,<sup>259</sup> but at the same time, it produces a wound that, unlike the sliced delicacy of a rapier cut, was expected to “plow thy bowels up” (IV.ii.89).<sup>260</sup> The beauty of the weapon is its simple efficiency, yet its ugliness lies in its casual, destructive capacity. The sabre is a tool, and the conversation expected of it is much less polite than that of many European swords. In terms of the kinetic language of violence, we might call it a “terse” conversant, but just like the Moors

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<sup>258</sup> Alfred Hutton, *Cold Steel: The Art of Fencing with the Sabre* (Mineola: Dover, 2006), 2-3. In other words, the blade was less versatile; the mid-blade region of most swords can be used for more-complex maneuvers. The foible is only used to cut, while the forte is only used for defense. The simplicity of the sabre means that it is primarily a cutting tool.

<sup>259</sup> See George Silver, *Paradoxes of Defense*, for a detailed explanation of this perceived effeminacy.

<sup>260</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, (London: Routledge, 1995).

imagined to wield it, its arguments were often persuasive. The Moorish warrior brings with him, in the traditional model, the destruction of literacy, or, as Ian Smith explains, “the villain of this drama of renewed European literary and intellectual history is the barbarian, the conquering invader of late Roman Empire whose ignorance led to the erosion of Greco-Roman learning.”<sup>261</sup> Just like the stammering speech that was associated etymologically with the word “barbarian,” the sword of the Moors lacks the baroque subtlety of its comparable European cousins.<sup>262</sup>

Early modern representations of the sabre, meanwhile, play on temptation narratives because they follow the medieval tradition that Turks gilt their swords with precious jewels, specifically drudging up jealousy of Turkish affluence. The fear that one might “Turn Turk” was accentuated by the idea that the Moors, who bore lavish swords, were unimaginably wealthy. Ignoring the lure of lucre fit well with humanist notions of overcoming sinful desires in the early modern period. Consider the thirteenth century example of the pagan Valdebron from *The Song of Roland*, who describes his sword as follows: “a better blade is none. / A thousand mangons are in the hilt thereof.” (48.4-5)<sup>263</sup> Even the Shah of Persia’s scimitar mentioned above carries with it this notion of affluence, but English swordsmen would have feared the dangers of gaining the world to lose their souls.

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<sup>261</sup> Ian Smith, *Race and Rhetoric*, 75.

<sup>262</sup> The ancient Greeks parodied non-Greek tongues with the onomatopoeic phrase “bar bar,” a joke that eventually became etymologically relevant to “barbarian” cultures, specifically the people of the Barbary Coast.

<sup>263</sup> *The Song of Roland*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (New York: Penguin Books, 1957).

Finally, the controversial Anglo-Moroccan alliance was often in the back of Elizabethan audience members' minds. Elizabeth I's attempts to secure her footing against Catholic Europe led her to seek allies in the Mediterranean. Central in this endeavor was Morocco, and the figure most easily associated with this Anglo-Moroccan alliance (and therefore the most accessible example of a Turk for many in the London audience) was ambassador Abd-el-Ouahed ben Massaud. His famous portrait prominently features his ornate scimitar, turned almost to the direct center of the image.<sup>264</sup> The trade between England and Morocco was conflicted because many interactions with Moorish fleets were mutually profitable, but in others, piracy and the enslavement of English sailors occurred.<sup>265</sup> England wanted an alliance with the Turks to protect them against Catholic Europe, but they also feared that their new allies' Islamic faith made them untrustworthy and potentially dangerous. The fear of alliance was, in effect, a fear of Turkish swords coming to serve the English throne.

When one attempts to read the Moor through the sabre, he or she has to compare the baseline assumptions about Moorishness against the actual use of the weapon. In early modern plays, for instance, what we usually see are the moments when that univalent reading breaks down, moments when Turkish or Moorish characters do not represent their own stereotypes. In fact, only rarely do playwrights actually show acts of violence with these weapons.<sup>266</sup> Generally, their appearance onstage is symbolic in nature, but lacking in kinetic execution. Therefore, the racialized valences of stage

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<sup>264</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age* (New York: Random House, 2009), 269.

<sup>265</sup> *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England*, ed. Daniel J. Vitkus (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>266</sup> One notable exception is when Aaron murders the nurse in *Titus Andronicus*.

swords would be unworthy of note if they were copasetic with their audiences' expectations *precisely because* they would not create anxieties for either the writers or the audience. The presence of sabres on the early modern stage evokes a fear of assimilation into Mediterranean practices, but violence is less-frequently the tool of assimilation; temptation to adopt foreign customs possesses a much more powerful draw than force. In this model, the kinetic language of violence teaches us how swords signify both bodily and performance-based difference, allowing for a biological presentation of selfhood that is easily modified by dropping or equipping a weapon (or the customs that produce material objects such as weaponry).

In two of the plays I shall discuss here, *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, we see how the scimitar's attractive forthrightness pushes against the rapier's unhappy position as a "weapon of subtlety."<sup>267</sup> The rapier becomes a normative standard of European culture almost every time it appears next to the sabre. In *Titus*, for instance, Aaron uses a scimitar to defend himself and his son against the Goths' rapiers, while in *Othello*, the absence of the Moorish scimitar ascribes a subtlety to the fallen hero's suicide that actually highlights his adoption of Venetian civility over a more-English forthrightness. Meanwhile, *Tamburlaine's* eponymous hero, like Aaron, relies on the brutality of the sabre to overcome opponents who have been made weak through hyper-civilization. We see in all of these examples an awareness of the racialized valences of the sabre, and in each case playwrights rely on the audience's expectations in order to challenge both naturalized and performance-oriented instantiations of race. While the prosthetic tools

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<sup>267</sup> *The Roaring Girl*, II. 112-114

used to represent blackness on the actors' bodies become a dividing line between the self and the Other, we see the sabre breaking down these same, simple distinctions of racialized alterity. Unlike prosthetic blackface, the sword functions as a fecund object that offers an avenue for race to seep past the skin and replace the "native act and figure" underneath. Playwrights gain great traction with this tension, but not by playing on fears of the "Moor" as the bogeyman. Instead, the phobias at work in these racialized discourses were powerful to an English audience because, as the English expanded their global influence (and, eventually, their Imperial holdings), national identity was threatened by cultural miscegenation, a process that might fail to turn the world English, and in the process, may succeed in un-Englishing the world.

*Titus Andronicus* – Aaron's Scimitar

The fact that swords often function as fecund extensions of the body allows racialized readings of various swords to imply a biological model of race. Certainly, if the fecund arm extends the normative capabilities of the body, then the characteristics of a racialized body should likewise be augmented by swords that are coded in similar fashion. We certainly see such a narrative play out in characters like Morocco, from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*; characters whose swords become part of their racially-charged characterizations abound in early modern drama. However, as we see in many early modern plays, the scimitar enters the plot during moments when racialized characters break expectations of their racial structures, destabilizing a purely biological instantiation of race. In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, we find this process happening

when Aaron, one of the most aggressively racialized characters in the canon, uses a scimitar to reject Roman cruelty, othering himself and appearing (if only momentarily) heroic. Unlike a prosthetic, the fecund arm instantiates, but does not presume, biological race. Aaron must divide himself from the Romans by drawing his sword, just as a white actor covers his face with prosthetic blackface, but the act of drawing the sword reproduces the customs of Otherness in a mechanical and vaguely biological way. We see the conflation of the referent (sword) and the concept (race) in moments such as these, even as such moments refute the notion that the relationship between racial performance and racialized biology is definite.

Unlike Peele's Muly Mahamet,<sup>268</sup> Aaron is explicitly from sub-Saharan Africa. If black Africans in the English imagination are, as Loomba and Bartels assert, at their core, without language or culture,<sup>269</sup> one can interpret them as being a blank page upon which others must write.<sup>270</sup> This makes the blackamoor a particularly useful subject for the process of empire because he or she fits well in a "society that takes its very definition from conquest and so depends, even thrives, on the cultural intermixing that is the result."<sup>271</sup> As Bartels suggests, the Roman state that absorbs subjects into its empire is not the empire that Titus tries to build upon his return to Rome, but it is the kind of system the English would have recognized as the superior one. As Vitkus explains:

English anxieties about cultural pollution, miscegenation, or religious conversion were intense, but at the same time the cultural, ethnic, and religious differences

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<sup>268</sup> See *The Battle of Alcazar* (1591).

<sup>269</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 57-58.

<sup>270</sup> Ian Smith, *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 81.

<sup>271</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 68.

were often embraced and internalized as English culture began to absorb and articulate those differences as a part of its own process of self-identification.<sup>272</sup>

To make an empire, as critics have demonstrated, is to learn how to selectively absorb colonized cultures. Unlike the Turk, who seemed to have a monolithic culture that produced an inferiority complex in the minds of would-be English imperialists,<sup>273</sup> the sub-Saharan African iteration of the Moor was a more pliable subject in the English imagination, the kind of subject the English liked to imagine themselves going *through*, rather than *against*.<sup>274</sup> Because of the cultureless blank slate the English imagined that black Moors provided, they were potentially the easiest to assimilate, but the fear associated with them was that some transgressive power might reach them before the English and pre-program them for evil. For instance, as Bartels points out, the anxiety Hakluyt associates with Africa is not the locals, but rather the perverting influence of Spanish and Portuguese traders.<sup>275</sup> The biological model of race in the period presents Africans as writeable subjects who might be capable of performing various European or Turkish cultures, depending on who might imprint themselves. Africa became, in this context, a continent of people who could potentially become a nation of English folk, if imperialists got to them fast enough, but they also feared that Africa might become an extension of Spain or Portugal if the English did not intervene.

What makes Aaron so transgressive, then, is that he offers resistance where none is expected. Far from being a pliable blank slate, Aaron has come pre-programmed with a

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<sup>272</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 22-23.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>274</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 63.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 59.



culture that is neither Gothic nor Roman. Carolyn Sale, for instance, sees him as culturally akin to the Britons.<sup>276</sup> He is constantly separated from the ranks of the über-white Goths, but he is grouped with them when compared to the Romans. He directly redefines his skin as un-writeable:

Coal-black is better than another hue,  
In that it scorns to bear another hue (IV.ii.101-102).

While this moment may seem like an apologetics for the baby's (and, by extension, Aaron's) skin color, it is also important to remember that the refusal to be inscribed upon is exactly what causes the play's main conflict. As Bartels explains, "if *Titus Andronicus* ends with an inscription which seems to insist that the Moor be written permanently out of mainstream culture and into a detachable, indictable type, that is not where the play begins."<sup>277</sup> Aaron is not inherently subjected, according to Bartels, and he certainly is not subjected according to his skin color. We must therefore intuit that Aaron is actually deciding for himself to what extent he will be incorporated. It is Aaron's ability to resist definition, to scorn "to bear another hue," that makes him a poor object of imperial domination. In point of fact, Rome's troubles in *Titus Andronicus* come from the empire's inability to dominate and assimilate Aaron as a Moorish subject.

Aaron's unconquerable nature is particularly visible, as we see, when the baby's birth becomes the tipping point that turns Aaron permanently from Roman society.

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<sup>276</sup> Carolyn Sale, "Black Aeneas: Race, English Literary History, and the 'Barbarous' Poetics of *Titus Andronicus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no.1 (2011): 26, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/shq/summary/v062/62.1.sale.html>

<sup>277</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 67.

Because Tamora would destroy the child, Aaron has to face a clear moment of choice: he can “do execution on my flesh and blood,” (IV.ii.86) or “keep mine own” (IV.ii.108). Never are the markers of difference more clear than in this moment, and it is no coincidence that Aaron’s scimitar appears in the middle of it all. “He dies upon my scimitar’s sharp point,” promises Aaron, “That touches this, my first-born son and heir” (IV.ii.93-94). In fact, Shakespeare goes out of his way to use the swords in the text as markers of difference; this moment shows how powerfully the Romans have failed to assimilate Aaron into their culture. Demetrius offers to destroy the baby with a distinctly European weapon, and his description of this hypothetical act of violence is revealing:

I’ll broach the tadpole on my rapier’s point.  
Nurse, give it me; my sword shall soon dispatch it. (IV.ii.87-88)

In the early modern period, the term “broach” meant “a pointed instrument used for roasting meat upon. A spit.”<sup>278</sup> Demetrius’ attempt to dehumanize Aaron’s baby as food relies on the visual image of the thin, flat blade of the rapier. We may presume an implied stage direction that has Demetrius drawing, and the image of the skewer-like sword is necessary to understand both the brutality of Demetrius (who is, importantly, better assimilated into the brutal Roman society than Aaron) and the fast-growing divide between the gentrified Goths and the un-inscribable Moor. The usually-barbaric scimitar becomes a vehicle for a more humane world. The hyper-civilized Roman society has lost

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<sup>278</sup> “Broach.” OED, accessed December 26, 2015. Sir Richard Barckley’s book, *Discourse of the Felicity of Man*, is a known source for several of Shakespeare’s plays. The OED cites Barckley’s use of “broach” in this way as one of the earliest examples – and Barckley happens to use the term in a scene of cannibalism: “She... put him upon the broach and roasted him.” Spelling modernized.

its sense of empathy, and the matter-of-fact nature of the curt scimitar is recast as a more humane weapon than the delicate, “civilized” Roman blades.

Readers might recognize a bit of foreshadowing in Demetrius’ plan to make a kebab and cannibalize the “tadpole,” but it is also worth noting that this scene parallels the opening events of the play even more strongly than those in the end, highlighting a consistent cruelty on the part of Rome’s citizens. Like Titus, Demetrius has learned how to maintain his assimilation with Rome, even if it means killing his own kin. “Stay, murderous villains,” Aaron says, “will you kill your brother” (IV.ii.90). In an attempt to maintain their place in Roman society, Chiron and Demetrius are more than happy to kill their own kind.<sup>279</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that Titus has exhibited the same kind of behavior, again, in order to maintain the marriage contract between his family and that of the emperor. “Barr’st me my way in Rome,” (I.i.295) Titus asks Mutius as he kills him. The thought that his son would prevent the operations of his Roman rites is too much for Titus to handle, even though Lucius calls it a “wrongful quarrel,” (I.i.298) a position that Marcus later reiterates; he has: “In a bad quarrel slain a virtuous son” (I.i.347). Demetrius’ willingness to do the same demonstrates that, even though the Goths have a vendetta against the Andronici, they have assimilated into Roman society by adopting Andronicus’ behavior. Because the Goth boys have become “incorporate” (the play regularly uses this term to describe assimilation) with Rome, only Aaron remains separate from the imperial machine.

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<sup>279</sup> This is, importantly, the same scene in which Aaron interprets Titus’ message from Horace, but the boys do not. “The man of upright life and free from crime does not need the javelins or bows of the moor” (IV.ii.20-21 fn). The “gift” of weapons is, of course, a threat, but Aaron allows the subtleties to escape the Goth boys. Later in the scene, he uses his unsubtle scimitar to spell out his own threat against them.

It is, of course, the threat to his son that makes Aaron refuse assimilation into the cruel culture of Rome, and he draws the scimitar to do so. Aaron rejects the proposition that they kill his son while establishing a direct opposition between Demetrius' slight rapier and his heavy, Turkish scimitar: "Sooner *this* sword shall plow thy bowels up" (IV.ii.89).<sup>280</sup> In preserving his son's life, Aaron precludes any hopes he has of assimilating into the Roman society, but seen in this light, Aaron performs the role of nonconformity. While the hyper-Roman Titus carves a swath of blood through any threat to Roman unity, and while the newly-Romanized Goths likewise exhibit a proclivity toward similar violence, Aaron uses his sword in defense of an innocent child. Baby Aaron's skin becomes the marker of the unimpressible Other because of his mother's marriage. The issue with the baby's blackness is not only an issue of miscegenation. Rather, the black skin is a problem because it proves Tamora's infidelity in a way that a white bastard would not do: "Thou hast undone our mother" (IVii.77). The baby's skin color reads as a symptom of a failing state. Regardless of Aaron's archetypical villainy throughout the rest of the play, the choice to turn Turk, announced when the scimitar appears, is here figured as a last resort of the virtuous defender of the innocent, set in opposition to the brutality of the normative society. Aaron turns the early modern commonplace of washing the Ethiop white on its head, demonstrating that Roman attempts to civilize Aaron do not necessarily translate into making him a better person or offering him gentility. Aaron is able to see the cruelty at the heart of Shakespeare's Rome because he is an outsider, and his ability to gain this perspective allows him to reject the

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<sup>280</sup> Emphasis mine.

assimilation. Turning Turk, or at least *asserting* Turk, becomes a better option than the machinelike cruelty of Roman civilization. The immutable nature of blackness, typically figured as a weakness in Christian humanism, is depicted here as a defense against corruption like the kind that plagues Shakespeare's Rome.

The scimitar appearing in Aaron's hand highlights two important points. First, it demonstrates the weakness inherent in the Goths' capitulation to the Roman way. With Demetrius' rapier, we see a stylized, "dancing" (II.i.538) weapon, one that is coded in the play as being better suited for threat and display than actual killing. The subtlety to which I have pointed earlier makes the rapier the perfect weapon with which to dispatch baby Aaron. When the father draws his heavier scimitar, we immediately see the hopelessness of a duel between the two opponents. The scimitar is thicker, with a characteristically menacing curve. If there is any doubt that Aaron means business, his promise to "plow thy bowels up" (IV.ii.89) alleviates any potential skepticism. If Demetrius' tiny blade is a skewer for cooking tadpoles, Aaron's menacing hunk of metal is a plow. The weapons are hopelessly mismatched, and it is clear that Demetrius makes no attempt to push his luck.

The appearance of the scimitar also signals Aaron's final disgusted break with Roman rule. Bartels points out that "The image of the weaponed Moor is perhaps all the more insidious then because it circulates loosely within this culture – and within foundational texts of English humanist schooling – to give definition to the crime-free

‘man of upright life.’”<sup>281</sup> Bartels is here referring to Lucius’ letter to the Goths from IV.ii.20-21, but this earlier moment in the play makes the latter line ironic. Aaron assumes the position of Moor by drawing a Moorish blade much like the javelins and bows of the axiom,<sup>282</sup> but while he has failed to be crime-free, he establishes himself as more upright than those who live under Rome’s broken law codes.<sup>283</sup> Remarking upon his own skin as a physical representation of what has just happened onstage, Aaron physically uses the sword to separate himself and his son from the Goths/Romans, but also, in drawing it, announces his ultimate withdrawal from the consumptive power of the Roman imperial machine. It turns out that Aaron’s skin, the part of him that is visible to others, is unwriteable because black “scorns to bear another hue.” However, his soul, the interior part of himself, *is* accessible to programming, as long as Aaron is the programmer. “Aaron,” as he puts it, “will have his soul black like his face” (III.i.206).<sup>284</sup> Aaron resists exterior definition from others while enfranchising himself with the power to declare his own position in the world. His skin becomes a biologically immutable fact of life, but his interior self becomes malleable. We should pause here to remember Smith’s argument about the prosthetic nature of early modern blackface. If, as Smith argues, the blackface establishes the kind of dualism that separates the black covering with the white actor beneath it, then Aaron rejects such an easy definition when he

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<sup>281</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 89.

<sup>282</sup> IV.ii.20-21, fn: “The man of upright life and free from crime does not need the javelins or bows of the moor.”

<sup>283</sup> It is no accident that this is the moment that Aaron reveals his Moorish countryman, Muly (IV.ii.154.). As we shall see, this is likely a reference to George Peele’s *Muly Mahomet*. See Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 66.

<sup>284</sup> In this moment, we might think of Aaron’s consistent attempts to define his interior as the opposite of the Romans around him. In the very same scene, Aaron remarks upon Titus’ self-mutilation: “If that be called deceit, I will be honest...” (III.i.189)

attempts to unify his soul to the black prosthetic. Here again, we see the scimitar blurring the lines between the inner and outer man, as Aaron uses the weapon to enact his “soul-blackening” behavior. The hazy line between Aaron’s body and his social self becomes nonexistent as he uses the weapon to unify his dualistic nature into something more monolithic. Aaron collapses the performative and biological nature of race into a unified whole.

By the time Tamora’s sons have gathered around Aaron’s child with rapiers drawn, the question is no longer a question of Goths versus Romans; rather, both groups have become “incorporate” in Rome, and only Aaron truly figures as an outsider for anyone. Rather than allowing himself to assimilate into the Roman imperial machine – and, indeed, we are led to believe that if Aaron kills the baby, he can do so – Aaron unifies his racialized nature in opposition to Roman (and, by extension, Western) rule. As Vitkus argues, Holy War, in the English imagination, was always a Western-Centric notion. If the Turks win violent encounters with Westerners, it is because God is scourging the West, while a Turkish loss exemplifies God’s favor.<sup>285</sup> In this sense, Aaron recognizes the need for his role as a Turk in Rome because Rome itself is unredeemable. Faced with the choice between compliance and propagation, he draws to defend his own. By becoming a Turkish character type in a pre-Islamic world, Aaron demonstrates that Islam is not, in this world, what defines the Turk; it is the corruptive power of a nefarious Other who refuses to be brought into the fold of Empire. Earlier, I mentioned that “turning Turk” was a simple slide into a kind of domestic alterity, one that was seen as

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<sup>285</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 47.

decidedly easy to do in the period. When Aaron draws his scimitar, he effectively turns Turk to save his son - the black prosthetic of his skin becomes a protective layer, rather than a disposable embellishment.

Thus, we can see how it is not only by association that Aaron brings Turkishness to the West in *Titus Andronicus*. The scimitar shows us the dangers of European imperialism: Rome's failure to lead admirably creates the enemy that would later come to define Europe after its fall. By doing so, the scimitar, juxtaposed against Shakespeare's references to his contemporary playwrights, highlights the untold story at the end of the play – one that answers the longstanding question of what happens to Aaron's child. When the Romans finally catch him, Aaron's punishment is visited upon him because he was the “breeder of these dire events” (V.iii.177). This line clarifies what many have envisioned as Shakespeare's most overt Marlovian plagiarism: Aaron's list of evils, taken nearly verbatim from Marlowe's Barabas (in *The Jew of Malta*). Shakespeare, rather than simply adapting the catalogue, manages to co-opt Barabas' servant, Ithamore, into his own story, in a sense. Choosing Aaron as a name for *his* Moor, and demonstrating powerful parallelism between the two characters, Shakespeare creates the “father” of the stage Turks. Surely, we see Marlowe's inspiration in the catalogue of sins.<sup>286</sup>

Shakespeare rewrites theatre history, however, by reconfiguring Aaron as Ithamore's *father*, rather than his *descendant*. The most important, though seemingly the most trivial,

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<sup>286</sup> I see no reason to rehash the by-now hackneyed argument here. Many scholars have noted Shakespeare's “borrowing” of swaths of Marlowe's *Jew* in *Titus*. See *Jew of Malta*, Act II, where Ithamore worships Barabas for his catalogue of evildoing.



point is a genealogical one: the biblical Ithamar was descended from Aaron.<sup>287</sup> Further, consider the less-overt invocations of Marlowe's Turk, bearing in mind that Shakespeare has set his play in the distant (and barely historical) Roman past:

I am no baby, I, that with base prayers  
I should repent the evils I have done. (V.iii.184-185)

The disdain for prayers in the face of death that Aaron demonstrates finds its parallel in Marlowe's Ithamore in *The Jew of Malta*: "[the friar] made such haste to his prayers as if he had another cure to serve. Well, go whither he will, I'll be none of his followers in haste" (IV.24-26). It is not only the pedigree of hatefulness that connects the two characters. When Aaron is furtively trying to find some way to hide his son and save the child's life, he evokes George Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* when he suggests that his countryman, Muly, might help raise the boy. Significantly, Peele's Moor's full name is Muly Mahomet, and Emily Bartels has already demonstrated a direct, familial connection between Muly Mahomet and the Prophet of Islam.<sup>288</sup> Even divorced of a unifying religious structure (Shakespeare's Rome, despite its chronologically diffuse setting, predates the Muslim faith), the scimitar helps link Aaron to Islamic characters in his performance of race – and his rejection of a more-Romanized performance. Relevant at this point, William Proctor Williams has pointed out that the most important information in *Titus Andronicus*, information that we do not have, is what happens to Aaron's son.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Exodus 6:23

<sup>288</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 30-31.

<sup>289</sup> William Proctor Williams, "'Behold the Child': Aaron's Baby in Text and Performance" (paper presented at the 2009 Blackfriars Conference, Staunton, Virginia, October 25, 2009).

I should like to suggest that, if we imagine that Aaron's baby *does* find its way to Muly Mahommet (the text is, of course, silent on this matter), then it learns the ways of Islam from him as per its stage pedigree. Infused with Aaron's capacity for evil, raised by the kinsman of the Islamic Prophet, the child grows up to be Ithamore, the Turk of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. Aaron's turning Turk becomes more than a simple behavior change; the performance of non-normative race sires a new biological race: the Turk (or, at least, the "stage" Turk).

We see in Aaron's child a baby born of evil and loosed upon the world by sinful Roman excess. In this context, Aaron becomes the ur-Turk due to his unwillingness to assimilate into a decadent Roman society. Rather than the scimitar being the technological achievement of Islamic cavalry, Aaron's sword becomes the aberrant weapon of the Turk, destabilizing the line between performance-oriented and biological models of race. In Shakespeare's narrative, Islam is not the prerequisite for Moorish "race"; it is actually a symptom of performing "Turk." Just as Aaron reverses the biological narrative of black criminality – the black skin scorns to bear another hue while the soul does not – he demonstrates that "Moor" is a biological reality, but one that is inextricably connected to a certain state of mind. Swords offer a variable construction of selfhood in that they are partially metonymous of the body (as the term "arms" implies) while being simultaneously made objects that the wielder chooses. Rather than Aaron's Moorish nature being the reason that he chooses his Moorish blade, we see the weapon as a tool by which he pathologizes his own performance of race.

The fact that Roman excesses force Aaron to refuse assimilation shows us that one of the aspects of Turkishness in the period is the failure of Western selfhood. Should the Roman Empire successfully assimilate its Aarons, the Turks are never engendered. We see a collectivist bent in this narrative; it is assumed that the role of empire is to foster a certain kind of selfhood, but figures such as the stage Turk challenge the presumption that empire is the correct means to this end. While Roman assimilation is linked to a kind of uprightness, *Titus'* Rome does not exhibit the necessary rectitude. Out of Roman cruelty are born the armies that eventually conquer Jerusalem and the pirates who, even in Shakespeare's day, take Christian slaves with little recourse. We see here a narrative of Moorishness that implies that the threat posed by the scimitar, and the version of selfhood that it instantiates, are what happens when the performance of European race falters. The sabre counters the prosthetic nature of blackness that early modern stage conventions signify through the traditional application of the fecund arm. By confounding the line between the body and the self, the weapon provides an embattled, and by extension much more threatening, model of racialized otherness. Rather than paternalistically seeking to assimilate, or "save," the Other, Shakespeare's Rome learns the hard way that the cost of empire may be deferral of the self to the other. As Shakespeare's pre-Said audience might have understood it, "he that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith."<sup>290</sup> The body politic of western civilization shows itself to be porous, rather than solid, and the danger of empire does not come from a fear that

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<sup>290</sup> Ecclus. 13:1.

England might be unsuccessful in conquering other countries. Aaron shows us that an empire might cause the problems it ostensibly solves.

*Tamburlaine 1 & 2* – Tamburlaine's Curtle-Ax

Like Aaron, Marlowe's Tamburlaine finds himself in the middle of an exchange regarding racialization and empire. The *Tamburlaine* plays differ from *Titus*, however, because rather than showing a Moorish figure being unsuccessfully assimilated into a white racial performance, Tamburlaine uses the process of empire to assimilate Turkish ways and thereby conquer the Mediterranean. In short, if Aaron shows us what happens to white imperialists when they fail to assimilate the Moorish countries they conquer, Tamburlaine shows us what happens when white imperialists successfully conquer Moorish lands. Marlowe's anxiety is not that the English might fail to police the line between different races, as Shakespeare shows with Aaron. Because Tamburlaine is white, the prosthetic blackness we see with Moors does not appear onstage, but the process of Turkish behavior looks similar nonetheless. The fear at the heart of the *Tamburlaine* plays is the possibility that the process of empire might erase the lines that racial performance draws. Tamburlaine uses a Mediterranean-inspired sabre, the curtlex, to lead a racially diverse army in his attempt to frame himself as the Antichrist. The curtlex, better known as the cutlass, owed its origins to interchanges with the Mediterranean, and so it often evoked the same responses in an early modern audience as the scimitar. We see in Marlowe a different kind of pressure being applied to the

biological narrative of race; here, intermixing of different cultures almost destroys the world.

In very few early modern plays is the kinetic language of violence more evident than in Marlowe's two-part juggernaut. What is particularly interesting about Marlowe's use of the device is that he inverts it for the most part; throughout the texts, the conflation of language and swordsmanship is a theme that develops on a scene-by-scene basis, constructing a notion that Tamburlaine is an incredible negotiator as much as he is a competent fighter. Tamburlaine and his men employ constructions such as Techelles' claim that:

Cowards and faint-hearted runaways  
Look for orations when the foe is near.  
Our swords shall play the orators for us. (1.I.ii.130-132)

In this moment, violence and speech become inextricably intertwined. Techelles describes a kind of conversation that is led by the sword, rather than by the mouth. The ability of the sword to answer where the English language cannot is a driving force in this play, and pushes toward a larger notion in the text: Tamburlaine's articulation and bombast are not separate from his fighting prowess; rather, his ability to conquer others is a one-sided conversation he holds with the rest of the world. Tamburlaine's command of language is violent on its own terms. The kinetic language of violence in *Tamburlaine*, from its heavy Marlovian meter to the descriptions that that meter enacts, is the force that allows the Scythian to conquer the world.

As Tamburlaine promises, “We’ll chase the stars from heaven and dim their eyes” (1.II.iii.23). The meter itself forces the word “heaven” to elide into proper iambic pentameter, and as the sentence creaks under its own weight, the affirmation of his warriors’ apostasy enacts upon the word “heaven” the same kind of violence he threatens toward the skies. The beating rhythm takes on a more-than-passing resemblance to the heavy strokes of a curtle-axe, and so the scansion of Tamburlaine’s mighty line becomes more than simple decoration. In the world Tamburlaine inhabits, his every word is law, but this is not merely a metaphoric kind of law – Tamburlaine speaks events into being throughout the text,<sup>291</sup> promising incredible violence and delivering it for nine acts.

Therefore, knowing the Turkish origins of European sabres situates the curtle-ax directly at the heart of the critical conversation surrounding *Tamburlaine* – and it contravenes the standard explanation of Tamburlaine’s religious affinities by invoking the heavily religious nature of sabres. Generally speaking, scholarship on the plays attempt to pin down Tamburlaine’s religious affiliation along traditional religious lines. Is Tamburlaine Christian? Muslim? Atheist? To my knowledge, no one has argued the possibility that Tamburlaine believes in the Christian God, but through his brushes with Mediterranean ways turns against that God in order to fashion himself into the Antichrist. As we shall see, Tamburlaine takes a Turk(ish) blade and infuses it with a godlike power to change the realities of the world through necessarily English speech. Tamburlaine allies the power of English language (a language that had, by Marlowe’s day, become directly imbricated in Christian traditions) with the behaviors of the Turks, creating a

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<sup>291</sup> Much like God in *Genesis* – more on the religious mimicry of God follows.

word/deed alliance that proves to be an unsettling echo of Elizabeth I's own imperialistic alliances with the Middle East. Conflating speech with the racialized embodiment of the sword brings discourse into the physical world, confusing the line between body and talk, melding cultures through imperialistic processes, and crossing a line that threatens to bring about the apocalypse.

At first, Tamburlaine's romp through Asia seems like a kind of English wish fulfillment. Mary Floyd-Wilson posits that the fear of the region was spawned by the idea that Moors were physically superior to white Northerners.<sup>292</sup> Marlowe's Tamburlaine is a walking collection of Northern stereotypes, particularly in terms of his barbarism and incivility;<sup>293</sup> we can therefore assume that at least part of Marlowe's goal in writing the play is to live out some kind of imperialist agenda, even if – as Vitkus argues – that agenda was merely “discursive.”<sup>294</sup>

Within the context of England's halting imperial ambitions, the fact that Tamburlaine uses, and repetitively refers to, his curtle-ax throughout both plays is no coincidence. References to weapons in the texts often present an indeterminacy that is telling. Consider the following passage, describing Tamburlaine's martial prowess:

See where it is, the keenest curtle-axe  
That e'er made passage thorough Persian arms. (1.II.iii.55-56)

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<sup>292</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 5.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>294</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 21-22.

A persistent thread in these moments is the indeterminacy of the subject-object relationship in the act of killing. One reading of “thorough the Persian arms” suggests that his sabre cleaves through the armor of the Persians, but the phrasing could also suggest that the Persians were the original owners of the weapon, and its passage is the endowment of the weapons from person to person. Taken on its own, this reading might seem like a stretch, but there are a wealth of similarly indeterminate moments in the two plays. When Tamburlaine sets out to battle his bombastic foe, Bajazeth, he instructs Zenocrate to keep Zabina company, asking her to “manage words with her as we will arms” (1.III.iii.131). Similarly here, one wonders if Tamburlaine means for Zenocrate to berate her opponent, or if the battle itself will be more civil than one might otherwise expect. In *Part 2*, Techelles presents the crown of Fez to Tamburlaine, which comes with the bonus of “an host of Moors trained to the war” (2.I.iii.141) who come as though Hades means “to aid thee in these Turkish arms” (2.I.iii.144). Here, it is unclear whether Hades is helping Tamburlaine by guiding this personal sword, here coded as Turkish, or whether he is invigorating the biceps of Tamburlaine’s new Turkish/Moorish subjects. In all of these instances, the indeterminacy of whether the sword is an agent or an object, of whether the damage is being delivered or received, and of whether the sword is an object or a body part, is indicative of the hazy difference between the things Tamburlaine says and what happens in his world, not to mention highlighting the slippery discursive space occupied by swords in general. Floyd-Wilson points out that Tamburlaine’s “working words, ironically, destroy civilizations as they civilize the English tongue.”<sup>295</sup> In many

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<sup>295</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 96.



ways, Tamburlaine's world is shaped through his speech-acts, a notion that connects his words to his swords, but also one that demonstrates Tamburlaine's surreal ability to bring events – particularly martial ones – into being simply by speaking them.

Floyd-Wilson further posits that Tamburlaine's rise from shepherd to emperor could be, as we might want to read it, an affront to hierarchy, but it is also possible that his enfranchisement is a metaphor for England's imperial dream of centering itself on the global stage.<sup>296</sup> As I shall demonstrate, attention to Tamburlaine's curtle-ax indicates that Tamburlaine's camping trip through Asia highlights both possibilities – Tamburlaine *is* overreaching from his predetermined place, and this attempt to subvert hierarchy *is* a metaphor for Mediterranean interactions of the imperial variety. While we generally assume that Tamburlaine's imperial successes model a positive way to initiate Empire, the conqueror's rise from the sheep-fields may not necessarily be a good thing. Performing a version of Turkish imperialism with the help of English verse allows Tamburlaine to conquer, and the curtle-ax offers us a problematic notion: imperial expansion may represent a *bad* model for hierarchical rebelliousness. If the cost of empire is the identity of the nation that enacts it, Tamburlaine's rise to power might instead serve as a cautionary tale about the destruction that ensues when someone deviates from his or her position in the world.

We certainly see in Tamburlaine's rise a touch of the divine. Early on, Tamburlaine begins to ascribe angelic qualities to his military prowess. Showing off his curtle-ax, Tamburlaine explains:

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 91.

These are the wings shall make it fly as swift  
As doth the lightning or the breath of heaven,  
And kill as swiftly as it swiftly flies. (1.II.iii.57-59)

Oxford's Marlowe editors suggest that the wings under consideration are "the cross-piece of [Tamburlaine's] cutlass,"<sup>297</sup> but this cannot be – Marlowe's very specific choice of the curtle-axe precludes a cross *guard* – European sabres do not have this structure. Cross guards perpendicularly split the blade of a sword from the grip. Unlike scimitars, curtle-axes are equipped with a basket-style hilt – the hand is enclosed in wires or a metal plate – and therefore do not have cross guards. If the wings are not a part of the sword, then, they are a part of the swordsman. Tamburlaine has characterized himself as an avenging angel – a reading quite in-line with our understanding of his function as a scourge of God. Even his sons offer a vague acknowledgement of these angelic wings:

...Follow we our father's sword,  
That flies with fury swifter than our thoughts,  
And cuts down armies with his conquering wings. (2.IV.i.4-6)

The comparison to angelic weapons of mass destruction is not incidental. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the Bible: "And the same night the Angel of the Lord went out and smote in the camp of Ashur an hundred four score and five thousand: so when they rose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses."<sup>298</sup>

Tamburlaine's sons construe their father as the ultimate servant of God, an angel, and

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<sup>297</sup> Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, 407. "Cutlass" is another word for curtle-ax.

<sup>298</sup> *The Geneva Bible* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 2 Kings 19:35. Spellings modernized.

configure the sword as a tool to empower him in like fashion to be the unbeatable weapon.

Generally speaking, the play's indeterminacy seems to be used as a smokescreen for difficult theological concerns at work in the text. *Tamburlaine* scholars have traditionally taken one of two tracks in understanding Tamburlaine's journey through the Mediterranean. Some believe, as Daniel Vitkus does, that the Scythian warrior is participating in a self-worship based on his repeated pleas to God for justification or condemnation – pleas that go unanswered.<sup>299</sup> The iconoclasm, aimed at a variety of religious structures, asserts Tamburlaine's overweening as Turkish at first – eventually devolving into a kind of atheism: "When Tamburlaine turns Turk," Vitkus points out, "it is a step on the path toward a more radical rejection of divinity. Ultimately, in the place of God or Mahomet, Tamburlaine asserts his personal power as a transcendent force, but in the end, this claim is denied by his death."<sup>300</sup> This reading sits well with the fact that the sword might, in a cursory reading of the kinetic language of violence, place Tamburlaine in league with the Turkish imperial machine, which the English felt was ruthlessly efficient at assimilating Christians and other religious groups into their own belief system.<sup>301</sup>

On the other side of the critical spectrum, Floyd-Wilson points out that Tamburlaine is a walking hodgepodge of *Northern* stereotypes, from his white skin to his lack of civility, and that his rise from shepherd to emperor could be a metaphor for

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<sup>299</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 54-55.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

England's attempts to center itself in the world through imperial aspirations.<sup>302</sup> In Floyd-Wilson's reading of the text, rather than allying himself with the Turks, he represents a (European) barbaric counter-civilization, one that brings about a reinvigoration of a decadent civilization, but that also creates in its victims an "otherness of 'civility.'"<sup>303</sup> Reading the sabre in light of Floyd-Wilson's argument might suggest that Tamburlaine has adopted Mediterranean mannerisms in order to purge their decaying society. This reading requires a Tamburlaine that is completely sure of himself and represents the ultimate in masculine self-containment. As Floyd-Wilson puts it, "his 'hardness' ensures his resistance to the mollifying influence of rhetoric even as he persuades, imitates, and wields language as a weapon."<sup>304</sup> This reading is also attractive by way of the sword because it directly ties in to the interconnectedness of Tamburlaine's words and his deeds. Both readings, however, lead to the religious motivations of the character, and by extension, the playwright. Indeed, most criticism, as Joel Elliot Slotkin argues, seeks in *Tamburlaine* "evidence of Marlowe's atheism, while others have interpreted it as evidence of his religious orthodoxy."<sup>305</sup> Slotkin offers a third explanation, that Tamburlaine goes seeking after a "true" religious structure, placing him firmly in the middle of Islamic and Christian practices, exercising "Pyrrhonian skepticism," which he conceives in a similar vein to modern agnosticism.<sup>306</sup> This reading assumes that

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<sup>302</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 90-91.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>305</sup> Joel Elliot Slotkin, "'Seeke out another Godhead': Religious Epistemology and Representations of Islam in *Tamburlaine*." *Modern Philology* 111.3 (2014): 408. Accessed 4 February, 2015.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

Tamburlaine's disrespect for divine power figures as an attempt to "mock religious certainties."<sup>307</sup>

If we read the curtle-ax historically, however, the *Tamburlaine* plays start to look much more like a morality play (such as Marlowe's own *Faustus*) than a farce, and actually take on a much darker tone than most scholars have so far been willing to acknowledge. Tamburlaine uses the sabre of the Mediterranean world against it because he is able, through the power of Marlowe's poetry, to conflate his words with his swords. The religious associations tied to race become as embodied as skin color through the swords, and the indeterminacy between the world of violence and the world of the spoken word creates a half-biological, half-discursive version of religion (and by extension, race). In line with this reading, Ian Smith has described an uncomfortable tension in the minds of English writers: "the racial markers that are the legacy of the classical system, linguistic errors made by the foreign speaker of an inferior tongue; and, with a twist of irony, the barbarism of English's linguistic reputation, anxiously acknowledged, strategically displaced or, in literary and dramatic practice, overcome."<sup>308</sup> As I shall argue, the curtle-ax in *Tamburlaine* is highly invested in my conversational model, and in the play, *Tamburlaine* combines the brutality of the sabre with the brutality of the English language. Ultimately, the marriage of violent words with violent deeds becomes the key to ushering in the Apocalypse.

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>308</sup> Ian Smith, *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance*, 3.

To understand this point, we must remember Oakeshott's assertion that cuttle-axes, as an English sabre, owe their origins to European interactions with the Middle East.<sup>309</sup> This adoption of other cultures demonstrates that Tamburlaine is initiating an imperial behavior, and as Vitkus has shown, interactions with the Middle East were, on England's part, humbled by the recognition that the Turkish culture was often superior to its own.<sup>310</sup> Imperialistic expansion requires a decision about – and a performance of – an iteration of race. Just as Aaron rejects Roman influence in Shakespeare's *Titus*, Tamburlaine's conquest is characterized by the decisions he makes about whether to adopt or replace the traditions of the lands he invades. This version of racialized performance offers a counter-narrative to the more naturalized version of racialization ongoing in the period. Using Africa as her example, Bartels explains that naturalized iterations of race become subsumed under the influence of racialized performances. She explains that "the history of Africa, as Africanus tells it, is a continuum of cultural transformation, the 'originall' of the Africans, north and south, impossible to isolate from the influence of 'outsiders.'"<sup>311</sup> Similarly, in *Tamburlaine*, the origins of the sword become tied to their current users, suggesting a problematic connection between the Scythian invader and the Moors he conquers.

The Turkish sword brings to mind images of the Christian apocalypse. The tradition of Muslim armies ushering in the end of the world existed in Europe at least since Matthew of Edessa drew parallels between Biblical apocalyptic prophecies and the

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<sup>309</sup> Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armor*, 151.

<sup>310</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 21-22.

<sup>311</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 145.

Turkish emir Afshin's slaughter of Armenian priests north of Antioch in 1066/7.<sup>312</sup>

Tamburlaine's attempts to draw attention to his sabre likely reminded Marlowe's audience of the tradition that the End of Days would take place in a Crusade between Christian and Muslim armies. Despite his use of a Turkish sword, Tamburlaine is described as white, and we should pause to remember Floyd-Wilson's historicization of humoral theory, which would suggest that not only the culture, but the body of the Northern Scythian was, while stronger in an animalistic way, incapable of maintaining cultured civilization.<sup>313</sup> She further points out that "Marlowe's venue for elevating English poetry – the theatre – is, depending on your source, a place of profound barbarity or a primary example of England's hyper-civilized decline."<sup>314</sup> By conflating the weapons systems of the technologically superior Turks and the strength of English poetry, Tamburlaine creates a world that is powered by the kinetic language of violence, and attempts to place himself in the prime position within that world through the strength of Marlowe's mighty line.

The parallels between the curtle-axe and its ancestor the scimitar would have drawn Marlowe's audience to expect a great destruction of culture, and other clues in Marlowe's plays point us in the direction of the Christian apocalypse. Tamburlaine's metaphorical-angelic wings, coupled with his trans-national army of enslaved peoples, including "The Turk, the pope, Afric, and Greece," (1.II.v.85) alludes to a worldwide

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<sup>312</sup> Christopher MacEvitt, "The *Chronicle* of Matthew of Edessa: Apocalypse, the First Crusade, and the Armenian Diaspora." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 61 (2007): 157. Accessed 30 December, 2015.

<sup>313</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 4.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

conquest, but the repetitive biblical imagery that permeates the text situates Tamburlaine clearly in line with the Christian Doomsday. Tamburlaine is destroying the old world, yes, but he is simultaneously creating a global culture in the process, bringing civilization to other countries with the Turkish weapon even as he unleashes his Northern barbarity against those who resist.

Tamburlaine recognizes this end of the world, and he longs for it. This destructive bent is evident in moments when Tamburlaine imagines his conquest in eschatological terms:

So shall our swords, our lances, and our shot  
Fill all the air with fiery meteors.  
Then, when the sky shall wax as red as blood,  
It shall be said I made it red myself,  
To make me think of naught but blood and war. (2.IV.ii.51-55)

Tamburlaine then acts upon his prophesy, using his curtle-ax to carve through the nations of the world on a trip that ends, by the time he dies, just outside the gates of Babylon (the locus of *Revelation* in the New Testament). The sky falls and the rivers run with blood in Tamburlaine's wake, and during the moments when he stops to reflect, he frequently attempts to draw correlations between himself and Christ. Many scholars have recognized the invitation to his sons to "search my wound" (2.III.ii.126) as an overt imitation of Christ's interaction with Thomas. Vitkus, for instance, sees that moment as an overt *parody* of Christ.<sup>315</sup> Gerald Pinciss even goes so far as to suggest that Tamburlaine may

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<sup>315</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 68.



be attempting to *join* the trinity as a fourth member of the godhead.<sup>316</sup> Less obvious, however, is Tamburlaine's comparison of himself to Christ in *The Book of Revelation*. During the Final Battle, Christ comes wearing a blood-soaked robe and a plethora of crowns, and "And out of his mouth went out a sharpe sword, that with it he should smite the heathen: for he shall rule with a rod of iron: for he it is that treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of almighty God."<sup>317</sup> Tamburlaine's persistent affirmation that his sword is in his voice mirrors this passage. He compares his birth to the "dissolution of the world," (2.III.v.82) and imagines the Fates and Death doing "ceaseless homage to my sword," (1.V.i.455) which opens mouthlike "gasping wounds" (1.V.i.458) that makes the earth "quake at every drop it drinks" (1.V.i.461). Such parallels are likely more blasphemous in an early modern context than a simple disavowal of God; Tamburlaine acknowledges His existence, refutes the Islamic alternative, and directly opposes himself to God.

The moment in which Tamburlaine burns the "Turkish Alcoran" is particularly tricky in view of his Mediterranean-inspired blade. Greenblatt suggests that burning the Qur'an is Marlowe's attempt to "challenge the habit of mind that looks to heaven for rewards and punishments, that imagines human evil as 'the scourge of God.'"<sup>318</sup> I disagree. The source of confusion comes from the assumption that *belief* in the Christian God is the same as *adherence* to Him. If Tamburlaine is attempting to fashion himself after the Antichrist, as I argue, he does so by unlocking the discursive power of Turkish

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<sup>316</sup> Gerald Pinciss, *Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975), 38.

<sup>317</sup> Rev. 19.15. From the Geneva Bible.

<sup>318</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 202.

weapons. As I have shown with Aaron in *Titus*, the Islamic faith is only a symptom of the stage Turk, not its cause. Tamburlaine's project is to marry English and Mediterranean ways, and so the burning of the Qur'an is an act of defiance that places him at the same odds against Islam as his other actions do against Christianity. Benedict S. Robinson actually explains that a militant Protestant agenda, the one that in the real world pushed England away from the rest of (Catholic) Europe and "into the arms of 'Turks' and 'Sarazens,'" <sup>319</sup> underpins the anxieties in Marlowe's play. Indeed, if we understand Tamburlaine's actions in terms of the historical events surrounding the Anglo-Moroccan alliance, we start to see something of Marlowe's criticism against English imperialism. The dangerous alliances England might enter into in order to compete on the world stage might very well allow them to succeed in their visions of conquest, but at the cost of their morality. In the play, to turn himself into the free radical of conquest that can "move the turning spheres of Heaven" (2.IV.i.117), Tamburlaine finds a way to use the superior power of the English language to enact the more-destructive ways of the Turk. Marlowe's world is one in which the blade of the Turk is the penultimate weapon and English verse is the quintessential expression of spoken language; marrying the two shakes the very firmament.

Furthermore, Tamburlaine expresses the ambiguity of language I have noted to an unparalleled degree, and it is his sword that allows him to contextualize his behavior as simultaneously part of the Christian God's plan and a refutation of the selfsame control: "My sword hath sent millions of Turks to hell" (2.V.i.178). The assertion has a double

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<sup>319</sup> Benedict S. Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 54-55.

meaning. On the one hand, Tamburlaine feels that he has personally delivered his Turkish adversaries to hell. This reading would ally him with Christian crusaders. On the other hand, we might read the moment metaphorically as an assertion that his sword, which has enabled the conquest and resulted in the recently burned religious texts, has shut the gateway to religious transcendence. When he burns the Qur'an, Tamburlaine uses the military might of his sword to disrupt the passages of Arabic speech, symbolized in the religious text, allowing his English to better articulate the kinetic language of violence. For Marlowe, the Moors are not the penultimate Turks; rather, the Janissaries who so frightened the English were dangerous because they possessed both the wealth and military technology of the Ottomans, but heightened those advantages with the barbaric blood (and poetry) of the Northern climes. Remembering Aaron's refusal to be assimilated into Shakespeare's hyper-violent Roman society in order to protect his son, we can read Tamburlaine's attempts to unify the entire world as the realization of English fear. English isolationism is important for anti-Imperialists not because the act of conquering "lesser" peoples is coded as an immoral decision. Rather, the fear that conquering the Mediterranean world will result in the assimilation and adoption of its features takes center stage in the *Tamburlaine* plays.

It is in this moment that Tamburlaine suggests that his followers "Seek out another godhead to adore" (2.V.i.198). Slotkin sees this moment as an inquisitive turn on Tamburlaine's part. He has exercised, Slotkin argues, a kind of empiricist experiment against the world's religions, and having heard the silence of the affronted gods, he seeks out new gods: "Having orchestrated the burning of the Qur'an, which may or may not

represent the Bible, having mocked and discredited the misguided certainties of several major religions, Tamburlaine stands in the smoking ruins of the ideologies he has demolished and asks, what next?"<sup>320</sup> Such a reading, however, forgets the primacy of the sword in the text. Because Tamburlaine has so thoroughly conflated his tongue with his sword, any hymns of praise could only be enacted violently. If we read the words "seek out" less in terms of an inquisitive religious experience and more in terms of predation, Tamburlaine is seeking another Godhead because he feels that he has not successfully unseated all the available gods. Returning to Tamburlaine's beginnings in the first play can help us to understand Tamburlaine's ultimate goals, and this in turn helps us define his religious framework.

Just before his parlay with Theridamas, Tamburlaine makes a ritualistic show of removing his shepherd's clothing and taking up the curtle-ax:

This complete armor and this curtle-ax  
Are adjuncts more beseeming Tamburlaine. (1.I.ii.42-43)

Tamburlaine already is the eloquent shepherd; what he needs is the battle to help him speak discourse through his sword. Once Theridamas parlays with Tamburlaine, he suggests that Tamburlaine has been trying to "menace heaven and dare the gods" (1.I.ii.157). While Theridamas thinks that Tamburlaine seeks to subvert Hell (1.I.ii.161), Tamburlaine corrects him; it is not Hell but Heaven he is after:

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<sup>320</sup> Slotkin, "Seeke out another Godhead," 428.

Jove sometime maskéd in a shepherd's weed,  
And in those steps that he hath scaled the heavens,  
May we become immortal like the gods. (1.I.ii.199-201)

It is worth noting here that once again, Tamburlaine's scansion crushes the word "heaven" to make it fit his iambic pentameter. In moments when Tamburlaine challenges the highest links of the Great Chain of Being, he uses his control of language (and, by extension, his sword) to attempt to subvert the prominence of Providence.

Tamburlaine, in short, wants to be the Antichrist. The curtle-ax becomes a weapon of apocalypse because of its association with the Turks (already accused of serving the dark powers responsible for the End of Days), but its true discursive power must be unlocked through the English tongue. English adoption of Mediterranean ways empowers both the foreign manners and the domestic tongue, and the very strain of this unhappy marriage is what will destroy the status quo and ends the world. The apocalypse must begin with a shout,<sup>321</sup> and Tamburlaine hopes to initiate that shout in English. The dangers of imperial ambitions become regressive in this context because they undo the linguistic diaspora of the Tower of Babel. Through the kinetic language of violence, Tamburlaine attempts to translate total war into iambic pentameter. The consequences of empire become a fear of success; Marlowe demonstrates an optimism of England's ability to conquer and assimilate the world, but he also fears that success in this endeavor will actually destroy everything.

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<sup>321</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16

We need to reassess our understanding of the play if we are to take this reading. Usually, scholars debate over whether Tamburlaine either rejects religion in favor of atheism, or sides with either Islam or Christianity. All of these arguments hinge upon the question of which, if any, god Tamburlaine believes in. I would argue, however, that Tamburlaine actually believes in the Christian God, but still rejects Him. In the tragedy's most quoted scene, Tamburlaine attempts to show his command of language as a godlike control over death. Indeed, Bajazeth imagines this conflation of tongue and sword directly:

But such a star hath influence in his sword  
As rules the skies and countermands the gods. (1.V.i.232-234)

Bajazeth, while not the most capable military commander, sees exactly what Tamburlaine is trying to do throughout the play; the Scythian wants to make his sword of the same air as his voice while his voice becomes as lethal as his sword. Just before Bajazeth's observation, Tamburlaine plays with the notion that he can send Death on errands. Commanding the virgins to see the reaper on his curtle-ax, he exclaims that:

[on his sword] sits Death, there sits imperious Death,  
Keeping his circuit by the slicing edge. (1.V.i.111-112)

The kinetic language of violence is all-important to unpacking this quote. First, we must understand that the "slicing edge" to which Tamburlaine refers is about a hand's-length

of the “false” edge and the entire “true” edge of his curtle-ax.<sup>322</sup> Sabres always have a sharpened false edge for a few inches, but as Dutton points out, English users almost never employed it.<sup>323</sup> Furthermore, to slice with the sword, one must use the full blade, which limits the reference to the “true” edge. This specific positioning puts Death in a subservient position to Tamburlaine; Death is on the bottom and the sword is above. This plays out when Tamburlaine orders Death around like a manservant. “I am pleased you shall not see him there,” (1.V.i.113) he says, directing them instead to his horsemen’s spears. He further implies that, just as he offers meat on his curtle-ax to Bajazeth, he also feeds Death on his sharpened points: “on their points his fleshless body feeds” (1.V.i.115). Given Tamburlaine’s conquest of a series of kings, the “imperious Death” becomes another of Tamburlaine’s subjugated rulers. Tamburlaine imagines that supernatural forces are just as controllable as the natural ones he conquers.

As a metaphor for European imperialist aspirations, Tamburlaine sees the presence of God in his world; he simply wishes to supplant, rather than submit to, Him. By using a sword that owes its roots to the Arabian world while conquering and assimilating country after country through the power of the English language, Tamburlaine enacts an imperialism that smacks strongly of Ottoman expansionist practices and English imperial aspirations. As Vitkus notes, the border of identity is a

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<sup>322</sup> The “true” edge of a sword is the side of the blade that faces out from the arm when the blade is held in a fist. On single-edged swords, the true edge is the side that is sharpened. The “false” edge, in both single- and double-edged swords, is the side of the blade that faces back toward the arm when held naturally. On a curtle-ax, there is a short portion of the false edge, near the point, that is sharpened in order to help the blade pass through flesh when thrusting.

<sup>323</sup> Hutton, *Cold Steel*, 2-3.

membrane that radiates *out*, rather than pushing *in*.<sup>324</sup> The Mediterranean empire was so efficient, according to England's understanding, because it was thought to be ruthlessly assimilating and subjecting Christians and others.<sup>325</sup> Tamburlaine, as an ultra-white Scythian, has adopted and applied the Mediterranean model against its best users, and as Floyd-Wilson notes, his savage whiteness is what makes him so successful. In other words, by taking on the weaponry and mannerisms of the Turk, Tamburlaine has effectively "turned Turk," but he out-Turks the Turks because he overreaches them with the superior power of English forthrightness. To succeed in fashioning an empire on Ottoman models might gain England control of the world, but for Marlowe, this conquest will be at the cost of the English soul. As with Aaron, the sword does not factor as a symptom of some type of religious heterodoxy. Adopting the ways of outsiders threatens the purity of Northern selfhood. The use of the sword, which factors as a way of adopting foreign customs, becomes the gateway to a racialized form of degeneracy.

### *Othello* – The Turk of Venice

Any chapter on early modern stage sabres would be incomplete without *Othello*. A longstanding tradition with productions of the play has ingrained in us an image of the Moor of Venice wielding a scimitar. Edmund Kean, one of the most publicized performers of the nineteenth century, famously wielded a scimitar in the role.<sup>326</sup> Tomasso Salvini similarly used a scimitar to "slit" his own throat as *Othello*: "and fell to the

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<sup>324</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 14.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>326</sup> *The Arden Shakespeare Othello*, 93.



ground, gasping and gurgling.”<sup>327</sup> Ira Aldridge, the first black Othello, equipped himself with a menacingly bent scimitar as well.<sup>328</sup> The list goes on. Charles Kemble, Paul Robeson, Lawrence Olivier, and others have all carried the menacing, curved weapon of the Turk in their performances. With such a longstanding tradition, surely the text would support arming Othello with this weapon. The truth, however, is that Shakespeare goes out of his way to avoid giving Othello a scimitar. I believe that choosing a scimitar for productions of *Othello* actually undermines much of the very specific coding Shakespeare does with the sword in Othello’s suicide. If any character should carry a scimitar, I believe it is Iago. In order to show the subtext of Shakespeare’s kinetic language of violence in this play, we must reread both Othello’s and Iago’s swords. The importance of swords in this play is clear from the effort Shakespeare expends on distributing them, and the stage business makes Othello’s sword particularly difficult to track. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall employ the kinetic language of violence to explain why the scimitar is a problematic choice for Othello’s weapon, and I shall return to *Othello* in the next chapter to describe why the rapier (the sword with which he actually kills himself) offers a more-historicized understanding of his racial coding. Recognizing that it is a problematic choice to arm an African character with a scimitar based on his or her race helps us acknowledge our own prejudicial attempts to place people of color into biologically-oriented interpretations of race. The embattled space between biology and tool occupied by the sword allows us to recognize early modern models of race that allow for performance, and recognizing the performance-based

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 94-96.

<sup>328</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare: Othello*, 16.

aspects of race allows us to understand why it is so important that Othello does *not* carry the Turkish blade.

In order to translate the language of Othello's suicide, we must better define which kind of "Moor" Othello actually is. As Loomba points out, there are Turkish aspects of Othello's personality, but he tends to defy the stereotypes usually levied against Turks in the period. He complicates notions of Moorishness by loving "too well" (V.ii.342) – Turkish husbands were thought to arm themselves against rebellious wives by not loving them well enough.<sup>329</sup> Loomba further explains that a Turkish Othello would have been more overtly threatening to early modern English audiences, but a sub-Saharan Othello highlights the similarities, rather than the differences, between Othello and his audience.<sup>330</sup> He likewise contradicts "black" Moorish stereotypes by failing to be too jealous. He is:

One not easily jealous, but, being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme. (V.ii.343-344)

These overt moments of resistance to various stereotypical forms of Moorishness no doubt contribute to scholarly confusion about Othello's particular origin. If we take Loomba's assertion that Moorishness is a "set of attributes that can be either acquired or shed,"<sup>331</sup> coupled with Vitkus' notion that alterity derives its power not from extreme difference, but rather the tangible similarities and possible interplay between two

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<sup>329</sup> Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 97-98.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>331</sup> Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 46.

cultures,<sup>332</sup> Othello's suicide starts to make sense. The sword he uses to kill himself, a Spanish rapier, is the final piece to the puzzle.

In the suicide scene, the weapons are hotly contested, and there is no reason to believe that Shakespeare would create such complicated blocking unless it was important to the end of the play. In fact, Othello gets disarmed at least once (possibly twice) in his attempt to kill himself. It is unclear exactly what kind of sword Othello carries through the majority of the play; it only becomes important when Othello realizes how badly Iago has ruined him. He tries to kill Iago with this unspecified weapon, but Iago gets away, murdering Emilia on his way out the door (V.ii.234). Somewhere in the middle of all this scuffling, Montano<sup>333</sup> gets ahold of Othello's sword: "Take you this weapon, / Which I have here recovered from the Moor" (V.ii.237-238). While it is unclear how exactly the sword gets lost (perhaps in the confusion with Iago, Othello tries to kill him and is disarmed in the tussle), the important point here is that Shakespeare goes out of his way to put a new sword in Othello's hand – and that sword is importantly a rapier. I believe that his sword is a rapier because Spain was best known for its competent fencers.<sup>334</sup> Spain is generally accepted as the birthplace of the rapier, with its earliest iteration known as the *espada ropera*, which appeared in the late 1400s. The sword makers of Toledo and Valencia were world-famous for their high-quality rapier blades.<sup>335</sup>

Here, we are faced with a staging issue. After Othello kills Iago, Lodovico commands someone to "wrench [Othello's] sword from him" (V.ii.285). There is no stage

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<sup>332</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 8-9.

<sup>333</sup> Whose name describes a fencing maneuver aimed at the organs of generation.

<sup>334</sup> See Chapter Quarte for more information.

<sup>335</sup> Withers and Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History of Knives, Swords, Spears & Daggers*, 290.

direction to indicate whether anyone succeeds in doing so, but I am inclined to believe that Othello uses this sword to hold off the other men. If not, we have to make two difficult assumptions: one, that Othello, the most powerful warrior in the play's world, can somehow be disarmed twice in the space of a single scene, and two, that having been inept enough to lose two swords in short order, he is somehow still athletic enough to kill himself either by producing a new weapon from somewhere on his body,<sup>336</sup> by stealing one from his captors,<sup>337</sup> or by pulling his rapier back out of Iago's body.<sup>338</sup> The much more likely possibility, then, is that he uses the rapier to fend off the others. This would actually explain the otherwise-nonsensical stage business that has Cassio showing him Roderigo's letter, the final piece of incriminating evidence against Iago (V.ii.322). If the men are at sword point, threatened by a person who has just killed his wife and stabbed Iago right in front of them, the letter becomes an attempt to talk Othello down from his guard. Lodovico's line, "You must forsake this room and go with us" (V.ii.328), only makes sense if Othello has the power to resist. If Othello was bound, this line would be a command, rather than a plea, but we know he is free. Othello's continued possession of the sword explains why he has time to talk about his motives to his audience/captors. It is, therefore, safe to assume that Othello controls the rapier in the scene, rather than going through three different weapons to kill himself.

Understanding Othello as a person who attempts to assimilate himself within his culture, but who meets unsurmountable resistance at the hands of intolerant members of

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<sup>336</sup> Which would make his search for the Spanish sword nonsensical; why would he seek a weapon if one was already hidden on his body?

<sup>337</sup> This would also be far-fetched, as the same captors have disarmed him in a fair fight twice already.

<sup>338</sup> This would be fun for an audience, but "fun" does not correlate with "likely."

that culture, helps us recognize the very Western nature of his suicide. Unlike Aaron, who resists assimilation at Roman hands and is executed for his misdeeds, Othello's suicide is coded as a Roman death. If we read *Othello*, as Vitkus does, as a play that contains hints of English anxieties over burgeoning trade and imperial aspirations,<sup>339</sup> we might lean toward casting Othello as a Turk. As Vitkus explains, "English anxieties about cultural pollution, miscegenation, or religious conversion were intense, but at the same time the cultural, ethnic, and religious differences were often embraced and internalized as English culture began to absorb and articulate those differences as part of its own process of self-identification."<sup>340</sup> In other words, Othello's attempts to fit into Venetian culture, from his position of authority in the Navy to his marriage to a Venetian woman, would have been laudable steps toward cultural incorporation. Figures like Brabantio demonstrate a counter-narrative of resistance to these kinds of assimilation, but as Vitkus argues, the profits associated with inclusion would prove too tempting to resist.<sup>341</sup> Particularly in *Othello*, as Robinson argues, the eroticized draw of Eastern magic is imbricated in the alluringly lavish material wealth to be had there.<sup>342</sup>

Ultimately, Floyd-Wilson offers the best explanation for what apparently happens with Othello. As Floyd-Wilson shows, Othello starts the play "fixed and undivided," much like his English counterparts, yet his African descent actually helps him to avoid the naiveté that English people were thought to exhibit from this single mindedness.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 6-7.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>342</sup> Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature*, 73.

<sup>343</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 150.

Meanwhile, what Iago does to Othello is to disjoint his interior from his exterior by teaching him to harbor jealous conceits in his mind.<sup>344</sup> Othello is reflective enough to recognize the poisonous humoral degeneration Iago has infused in him as a kind of corruption, but he is unable to see the same corruption in Iago because Iago misdirects Othello's suspicions onto Desdemona.<sup>345</sup> Therefore, through Othello, Shakespeare's English audience sees the corrupting influence of Venetian society on a naïve, humorally inferior outsider not as an example of African weakness, but of the corrosive power of Mediterranean inwardness.

I argue that Iago has spent the play teaching racism, condescendingly reifying the idea that Othello's skin is a sign of inner darkness, even though he does not believe it himself. The teacher-student relationship projected onto Iago and Othello in this moment is significant because this explains why Othello needs to be an African Moor, rather than a Turkish Moor. While the Turks were pre-programmed, culturally speaking, Africans were viewed, much like the maps of Africa itself that were circulated during the period, as blank spaces, waiting to be written upon by more-civilized invaders. Loomba explains this process: "...as the nations of Christian Europe initiated their attempts to conquer and shape other people in their own image, what we call modern racism was born."<sup>346</sup> We must, therefore, view the play not only in terms of Othello's race, but also in terms of Iago's. The paternalistic notion that seems to be happening in Othello is steeped in the

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 151-152.

<sup>346</sup> Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 17. It is therefore not difficult to see the paternalistic attitudes that would soon develop in Europe, perhaps most notably culminating in overt statements of over watch, such as Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden."

idea that Italians had cultivated a Machiavellian inwardness. Iago is not motivated by random malignancy; his interiority is motivated by his own humoral inheritance.<sup>347</sup>

In this sense, Othello's integration into Venetian society has become physiologically thorough, but the cost of learning such inwardness is the suspicion that others are practicing it, too. In this light, we are led to understand that Othello's actions are not entirely his fault. We must assume that, had a likewise downright Englishman been Othello's friend instead of Iago, the caustic effects of inwardness would have never reached him. Othello could remain safe, happy, and married because he has been successfully performing a racial code quite in line with what the English perceived to be healthy living. Iago, like Aaron, relies on stereotypes of racial difference. Unlike Othello, Iago is controlled both by his humoral makeup and the performance of race. Iago imposes a concept of difference on Othello by pushing a biological narrative of race that does not allow for performance.

All this goes to show exactly how important it is that Othello *cannot* carry a sabre. Ania Loomba notices the intentional reference in *Othello* to his "Spanish sword," but misses an opportunity to read the sword historically. She suggests that the Spanish sword helps highlight the Turkish aspects of Othello's ambiguous race,<sup>348</sup> but as I have shown, early modern dramatists could – and regularly did – turn to the scimitar as a performative signifier for "Turk." By choosing an inherently European weapon, one tied directly to the land of its origin (a land that, in fairness, was more cosmopolitan than some others in

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<sup>347</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 142-143.

<sup>348</sup> Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 92.

mainland Europe), Othello emphasizes the Westernized aspects of his personality. The fact that scholars find Othello's race so difficult to pin down is not only because race is a slippery term in the period; Othello is so incorporated into Venetian society that the mimetic instantiation of difference we might ascribe to a Turkish race is less visible. Moor or no Moor, Othello's demographic subjectivity, at least in the beginning of the play, is too normative to separate from other Venetians. Othello started life as a blank,<sup>349</sup> and his being "of Venice" has been dependent, from the beginning of the play, on his ability to "speak unbonneted" (I.ii.23). As Iago severs this forthrightness, Othello loses himself to calamity; his humoral body's inclination to extremes of passion takes over, and he loses his ability to perform a European version of race.<sup>350</sup>

Othello's African receptiveness is his downfall, and so, those seeking scimitars in this play should look not to Othello, but to Iago. Humorally understanding Othello's weakness to imprinting allows us to see that Iago brings to the stage an English fear of otherness, but it is not enough to recognize only that Iago is the play's villain. We must recognize his humoral imbalance as an indication that Iago is the racialized nonconformist, not Othello. Jonathan Gil Harris has argued that early modern political theory, using the body politic as a metaphor (though sometimes as metaphorical as actual), conceived of social ills as contagions, inserted into the body. Using Harris' focus

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<sup>349</sup> Biological race is visible in this fact.

<sup>350</sup> It is worth noting, as Michael Neill does, that as much as we may like Shakespeare to be antiracist in this moment, "It would no more have been possible for Shakespeare to 'oppose racism' in 1604... than for Marlowe to 'oppose anti-Semitism' in 1590: the argument simply could not be constituted in those terms." We see in this moment the connections between racial performance and biology. Othello's body converts to a more racialized one because of the machinations of Iago. The performance of race becomes the biological reality of race in this moment, invoking both models and demonstrating the limitations of corporeal reality. Michael Neill, *Putting History to the Question* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2000), 247.



on Jewish immigration as a purgative clyster, we can start to understand Iago's interactions with Othello. Iago, however, does not purge the Venetian state as Jews sometimes do in other texts. "Barabas," explains Harris, "is providentially administered to the body politic as a curative purge via the anus."<sup>351</sup> Iago likewise administers medicine to Othello, but in Othello's case, the medicine causes his body to leak from oversaturation of poison. Rather than cleansing the body, Iago's insertion destroys it.

When Othello finally starts succumbing to the jealous rage in Act IV, proving the stereotypes about him uncomfortably true, Iago exults: "Work on, / My medicine, work" (IV.i.44-45). This parallelism highlights the notion that Othello has been filled with Iago's toxic doctrines, and that he is in fact so full of this bile that his body can no longer contain it. In this case, the "drugs or minerals" (I.ii.74) Brabantio accuses Othello of wielding against Desdemona (imbued with notions of evil, African magic and no shortage of penetrative sexual miscegenation) turn out to be a domestic product. Brabantio's failure is the belief that this racialized conversion-salve comes from the Moor his daughter has married, but in truth, we see Iago spend the play slowly inserting it into Othello. Othello's performance of Turk becomes a forced one; rather than seeing him "turn Turk," as with characters such as Tamburlaine and Aaron, we see Iago "turn" Othello "Turk." Even as he codes his inner self as Western, Othello's eyes begin to "Drops [*sic.*] tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinable gum" (V.iii.348-349). Vitkus, attempting to read Othello as a Turk, asserts that "More than being identified with any specific ethnic label, Othello is a theatrical embodiment of the dark, threatening

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<sup>351</sup> Harris, *Foreign Bodies*, 89. Barabas, of course, is the main antagonist of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*.

powers at the edge of Christendom.”<sup>352</sup> I would contend, however, that Othello has become a colonized subject in this moment. Iago has infused him with a jealous rage, bringing to his version of subjectivity an Italianate inwardness. Othello has, as Loomba might suggest, been forced to adopt the ways of the Turk. Mary Floyd Wilson has already suggested that Iago is, in fact, the Turk – not Othello.<sup>353</sup> Most scholars have focused on Othello’s ethnicity to refute this claim,<sup>354</sup> but understanding the associations between sabres and Turks in the period, coupled with a nuanced recognition of “race” as a performance-based social construct applied to biological observations, allows us to recognize that Othello is much more European than not. Our impulse to place a Turkish blade in Othello’s hands is to point at Othello’s skin as the primary racial marker. Aaron determines the meaning of his own black skin in *Titus*, but in *Othello*, it is the outsider, the colonizer, who ascribes meaning to Othello’s skin. We follow Iago’s lead in this reading of race, but using the sword to communicate Turkishness comes from the same impulse that Judith Butler describes as “the schematic foreshadowing of an accusation, one which carries the performative force to constitute that danger which it fears and defends against.”<sup>355</sup>

Like Africans, Northerners were seen as barbaric, and it was thought that hypercivilized groups (jealousy being a sign of this hypercivilization) could use the benefit of a more English savagery.<sup>356</sup> The English earnestness was viewed as resistant to

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<sup>352</sup> Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 90.

<sup>353</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 156.

<sup>354</sup> Vitkus in particular makes a convincing argument to this effect.

<sup>355</sup> Butler, “Endangered Endangering,” 18.

<sup>356</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 93.

the corrupting interior effects of emotions like jealousy: “Jealousy clouds the judgment and rules the senses but also intensifies the mind’s capacity for self-scrutiny.”<sup>357</sup> The jealousy inserted into *Othello* throughout the play is a product of civilization, and as a result the jealous medicine that leaks out of Arabian trees and Moorish eyes indicates the colonizing influence of Turkish figures who function much like Iago in their respective texts.

To read Moorishness in *Othello* requires a divorcement from modern notions of race. We must understand the act of destroying Othello less as teaching a Moor to be a Moor and more of a colonization by more nefarious, but less externally identifiable, enemy. As Bartels explains, the drive to initiate trade with Africa began as an attempt to “protect” them from the evils of continental Europeans.<sup>358</sup> It becomes clear that it is too late for Othello precisely because Iago got to him first and imprinted upon him the vices and excesses of the Mediterranean region. Understanding the expectations of the sabre allows us to see that if anyone in the text should carry one, it is Iago.

It is, in fact, Desdemona who correctly contradicts the idea that Othello is simply incapable of controlling himself, diagnosing her husband’s real problem as contagion. Back in Act III, she confides to the audience that “Something... Hath puddled his clear spirit,” (III.ii.141, 144) identifying Othello’s problems as internal, rather than external. In the early modern period, internal corruption was that which scourged the externally

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>358</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 55.

unassailable.<sup>359</sup> In short, the problem with the stage machiavel is that its existence confounds the boundaries between self and other by creating an unreadable buffer between the two. Consistently throughout the text, the word “honest” becomes an ironic descriptor of Iago’s devastatingly dishonest subject position.

If we read Iago as a stage Turk, two valuable points come to light. First, we see a version of Turkishness that, much like Aaron and Tamburlaine, needs no grounding in physical characteristics. It demonstrates a trend in early modern drama to not only avoid, but actually contradict, emerging patterns of racialization that were being enacted in the period. For many early modern playwrights, the Turk appears not as a fixed racial stereotype, but rather a collection of ideologies – ideologies that writers frequently subvert and refute. Second, we see a heightening of English anxieties about “turning Turk.” If skin color and religion are less likely to be the causes of Turkishness than the effects of it, the slide into alterity becomes less of a conscious choice than a potentially devastating accident. If Turkishness can be injected, as it is in *Othello*, then the fears of miscegenation and usurpation become less one-dimensional than a problem of skin color; they become systemic troubles. The machiavel learns to invade the interior of other bodies as a kind of possession. By no means do I wish to downplay the xenophobia inherent in such constructions. Rather, if we understand the body as *susceptible to* Turkishness, rather than simply *indicative of* it, we can start to understand the processes that eventually came to fuel the slave trades in Africa and the genocides that began in North America. Sealed, self-contained bodies pose only a vague threat to others, but the

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<sup>359</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 138.

possibility that racial difference could be *contracted* through the porous surface of the early modern body offered justification for the enslavement or massacre of those whose racial demographic was constructed as undesirable. Concepts such as miscegenation become, in such a construction, an active threat, and state-sponsored atrocities can be justified as “self-defense.” Perhaps most telling of all, however, is the fact that the fear located in the sabre that we see over and over again throughout the texts I have discussed here has much less to do with the blade being inserted into the ever-fragile body. Instead, the fear that a person might carry such a blade, adopting the customs with which it is imbricated, becomes more unsettling than the possibility of dying on its point.

Knowing what we do about how the sabre works in early modern texts, we might momentarily indulge in a brief bit of speculation. Seeing the process by which Iago infects Othello with bitter, racially-coded jealousy, and having seen that it is inappropriate for Othello to carry a sabre, might we instead arm Iago with the same weapon without fear of infringing on the play’s use of the kinetic language of violence? We know from the text that Iago carries a sword in *Othello*, but we are never told what kind it is. I have suggested Othello cannot carry a sabre, but I think that, for the same reasons that we should remove the sabre from our Othellos’ belts, we may give them to Iago without undermining my point. At the least, the kinds of ideologies represented in the sabre fit perfectly with the behaviors Iago exhibits. To see the stereotypical Turkish cruelty in Iago requires no explanation – the entire plot of *Othello* hinges on it. As a soldier, Iago sets himself as a more direct, while less-European, military tactician than his rival, Cassio. Understanding the kinetic language of violence in the beginning of the play

allows us to see that his concerns about Cassio's "division" and "bookish theoric" (I.i.22-23) condemns new European ways of battle. As Patricia Cahill explains, "many English scientists and artisans... began to promote the sale of new mathematical tools devised for use in fortification, battle formation, surveying, gunnery, and other martial pursuits."<sup>360</sup> In this context, Iago is not commenting on Cassio's calculations, but rather his distinctly European military science. His critique of Cassio's greenness in battle plays directly on the kind of Turkish bluntness exhibited by characters such as Tamburlaine and Aaron. Playing into yet another Turkish stereotype, he considers his right to advancement is legalistically grounded, if not meritoriously so: "Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation" (I.i.35-36). He even directly imagines himself as a Barbary pirate ship: "I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but a sign" (I.i.154-155). As I mentioned earlier, such a figuration would have brought to mind the fears brought about by the naval dominance of rogue Turkish fleets. Further, given the prevalence of sabres in early modern European navies, were Iago to carry such a weapon, it could hide in plain sight, a visual metaphor that would bring all the analysis I have listed above to a head. Seeing a curved naval weapon on his hanger would provide a surprising visual metaphor; the weapon would not seem out of place until Iago truly begins to flaunt his Turkish nature. Like Iago himself, the sword would hide in plain sight, seemingly innocuous, but secretly corruptive. The performance of Turkish race would likewise surprise audience members trained to expect the outward signs of biological racialization. Such a figuration casts the racial dynamics of *Othello* in a much

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<sup>360</sup> Patricia Cahill, *Unto the Breach*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

different light. By placing the scimitar in Othello's hands, we allow Iago to misdirect us from his own subversive, and, in an early modern context, Turkish, behavior. During a period when a color-based economy of race was still under negotiation, the play allows its audience to fall prey to exactly the kinds of prejudices that fuelled European imperialism and slave trading. It suits Iago to comment on Othello's physical characteristics not because the Venetians he dupes are inclined to a skin-based racism, but because in teaching them to adopt this stance, he allows himself to hide a true malicious intent domestically- and in plain sight.

### Conclusion

The picture Giovanni Botero paints in his *Historical Descriptions* gets at the heart of performative race in the early modern period. While Botero imagines the Mughal Emperor in terms more like our modern notions of race, as a biologically determined Other, his fears about the "Great Turk" do not have to do with the emperor's native subjects. Rather, he ascribes the Mughals' military power to the acquisition of Christian converts: "So with us the Turk strengtheneth his estate with Janizars [Janissaries], and as he coveteth to be beloved and favored of them (to that end bestowing upon them the riches and honors of the empire) so they again acknowledge no other lord and master, I may very well say, father and protector."<sup>361</sup> Conversion implied a degree of performance to religious practice, and for early modern English writers, religious practices were closely associated with notions of race. The fear that "turning Turk" was such an easy transition created a crisis of identity for English writers. Most of the scenes in early

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<sup>361</sup> Botero, *Historical Description*, 111.

modern drama where the scimitar appears challenge the preconceived notions of the weapon's semiotic value, and at the same time, these appearances anticipate the audience having those notions. The expectations placed on the Turk were both strong and longstanding; English dramatists knew that they could rely on such prejudices when they staged the weapon. On the other hand, it seems clear that most of the time that scimitars appeared on the stage, they were there to take those notions to new conclusions. The mimetic ability of the English stage to show the limits of race as fluid and – at least partially – performative, was a discursive power of destabilizing proportions, and the sabre was a perfect site to show the inadequacies of easy definition. Race was simultaneously naturalized and performed, just as the sword was sometimes a body part and sometimes a piece of equipment. To recognize notions of “race,” notions that sometimes seemed entirely naturalized, as partially performative in nature demonstrates the discursive power of mimesis. Moments when nature and performance merge become illuminating instances of the dual nature of race in the early modern period. Meanwhile, the sabre shows how violence can overturn naturalized versions of racial stability, and attention to the kinetic language of violence offers one avenue through which we can gain discursive power *over* one's racial performance. For Aaron, the nonconformist turn allows him to deny the controls of a broken Roman state, casting Turkishness as an escape from corrupted systems. For Tamburlaine, the fictions associated with the sabre are useful in his own self-fashioning, and finding a way to meld his words and his sword provides him with world-conquering powers. Unlike other weapons that traversed the English stage, the sabre frequently provides a visual *threat*, but is very rarely used in



actual moments of combat. From the moment in which Tamburlaine's "slicing edge" speech concludes with the most jarring pump-fake in early modern drama to Aaron's use of the weapon in defense of his son, the sabre typically occupies a discursive function in the text, one that dis-covers the defining power of the kinetic language of violence. Like the threat of Ottoman invasion, the sabre provides an object lesson in the dangers of empire, dangers England has begun seeking but has not yet committed to. In this way, the scimitar and its European cousins provide a conflicted site not of active threat, but the much more terrifying possibility of assimilation. The fear attached to this weapon is not found on the "slicing edge" on which Tamburlaine fixates. The danger of the sabre resides not in its ability to lodge itself in English breasts, but rather in its ability to hang itself from English belts. Unlike the prosthetic blackness that indicated Moorishness on the faces of early modern actors, the fecund arm of the sabre functioned just like the falchion and the daggers discussed in the previous chapters, in that it provided a connection between the body and the social self, breaking down the easy distinction between bodily additions and bodily extensions. The sabre provides a much more dangerous indicator of race than prosthetic blackface – the sabre offers a somewhat contradictory model of race that simultaneously precludes biological reality as it threatens to alter biology, half-embodied and half-performed.

## CHAPTER QUARTE: “APIISH TOYS” – RAPIERS IN THE PLAYHOUSE

## CHAPTER V

### RAPIERS IN THE PLAYHOUSE

The history of the early modern theatre is inextricably intertwined with the rapier fencing schools of London. In fact, Adolph L. Soens demonstrates (in his 1969 study of rapier use in the public playhouses) that the history of the Blackfriars is as much tied to fencing as it is to theatre. In *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio calls Tybalt “the very butcher of a silk button,” (II.iv.24)<sup>362</sup> he alludes to a story about Rocco Bonetti, who ran a fencing salle in the Blackfriars, rented from the English playwright John Lyly himself. Bonetti, demonstrating his pride in his Italian fencing technique, boasted that he could remove the buttons from any English fencer’s clothing.<sup>363</sup> The connections between the playhouses and the fencing schools extended beyond obscure references in plays, however; many early modern playmakers were skilled in rapier play in their own right. Christopher Marlowe faced criminal charges after a duel with William Bradley in 1593, while John Day killed the playwright Henry Porter in a duel in 1599.<sup>364</sup> Perhaps most famously of all, Ben Jonson barely escaped hanging when he “feloniously and willfully

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<sup>362</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet* (London: Methuen, 2012).

<sup>363</sup> Adolph Soens, “Tybalt’s Spanish Fencing,” 123.

<sup>364</sup> Turner and Soper, *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay*, 18-19.

slew and killed [the actor] Gabriel Spencer.”<sup>365</sup> Jonson only evaded the gallows because he successfully pled benefit of clergy after writing out a confession in Latin from the Book of Psalms.<sup>366</sup> The historical connections between playhouses and fencing, coupled with the evidently extensive study of the art by playwrights and actors, meant that the early modern stage served as an exhibition hall for skillful rapier fighting. These rapiers were used in capable hands, and they were of excellent quality. Henslowe’s diary shows evidence that Henslowe paid eight shillings to rent a rapier and its hanger,<sup>367</sup> despite the fact that Ben Jonson’s personal weapon (the one he used to kill Gabriel Spencer) was worth only three.<sup>368</sup> Early modern theatregoers could have expected an amazing display of swordsmanship at the playhouses, to say the least, and the fact that so many in the audience probably practiced the art as well meant that impressing them would have required considerable skill.

Despite its ubiquity, the arrival of widespread rapier dueling was heralded as a sort of Continental invasion throughout early modern London. The weapon required a high level of sneakiness and grace compared to heavier weapons like the falchion, paying a unique attention to feints and ploys that were expected to trick the opponent by creating a dissonance between the promised violence and the actual chosen maneuver. This degree of trickery resonated with early modern playgoers’ brushes with Italianate

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<sup>365</sup> Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 135.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

<sup>367</sup> Foakes, *Henslowe’s Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 61.

<sup>368</sup> Donaldson, *Ben Jonson*, 134.

Machiavellianism.<sup>369</sup> Perhaps the most vocal of all rapier detractors, George Silver, cited the newness of the rapier as the quintessential sign of its moral deficiencies. He argued that “Experience teacheth us... There is nothing permanent that is not true, what can be true that is uncertain?”<sup>370</sup> According to Silver, England’s medieval warriors had perfected the art of swordplay, and the newfangled forms of combat (which feature the rapier in particular throughout Silver’s diatribe) demonstrated a decline in the moral fabric of the English warrior:

...we like degenerate sons, have forsaken our forefathers’ virtues with their weapons, and have lusted like men sick of a strange ague, after the strange vices and devices of Italian, French, and Spanish fencers, little remembering that these Apish toys could not free Rome from Brennius’ sack, nor France from King Henry the Fifth his conquest.<sup>371</sup>

Silver’s anxiety about the rapier’s newfound prominence was certainly based on precedent, if not historical accuracy. Silver was a member of a patented English organization, the Masters of the Noble Science of Defence, authorized by Henry VIII in 1540.<sup>372</sup> This organization had been the arbiter of English swordsmanship since that time, but the rapier in particular posed the greatest threat to the erstwhile Old Ways. By 1571, guards stood at the Temple Bar to ensure that rapiers that “exceeded a yard in length” were snapped down to size in the interest of public peace.<sup>373</sup> Silver and those like him believed that the rapier was capable of un-Englising the English in much the same way

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<sup>369</sup> Katharine Eisaman Maus and David Hillman have both written on the nature of the stage machiavel trope in early modern drama. My arguments here tie into their work, specifically Maus’ *Inwardness and Theatre* and Hillman’s *Shakespeare’s Entrails*.

<sup>370</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence: The Works of George Silver* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 2003), 202.

<sup>371</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 203.

<sup>372</sup> Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 9.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

as the sabre threatened to do. As he exhorted, “One valiant man with a sword in his hand will do better service than ten Italians, or Italianated with the rapiers.”<sup>374</sup>

Humoral discourses about whiteness, specifically Northern-ness (the British Isles and Scandinavia in particular) held that there was an internal/external consistency among those descended from Northern climes because they were too hard, and in an sense, barbaric, to be influenced by the mollifying effects of Mediterranean influences. Elasticity toward foreign customs was thought to make one soft.<sup>375</sup> Therefore, the anxiety about interiority that the rapier heightened was based in the sense that “true” Englishfolk were too barbaric to be civilized. Generally speaking, the English saw secrecy as equivalent to duplicity, and insisted upon a performance of selfhood that represented a unity between the person’s comportment and their inner thoughts, even if that consistency translated to naiveté. “Interiority,” as I shall employ it in this chapter, meant hiding, lying, cheating, falsity, and subterfuge. Interiority, as it was understood in the geohumoral sense, was a sign of detrimental civilization. These fears were not, however, univalent; as the polemicists and nationalists began to push the political landscape towards a British Empire, civilization became attractive, and the alternative forms of behavior associated with civilization were similarly reified. The rapier serves as a material object that was imbricated in this negotiation, and the ways the rapier was used not only employed these formerly-shunned patterns of behavior; it required them. The adoption of customs that the English associated with the Continent was not seen only as a move away from “true” English behavior; it was a medical problem. When George Silver

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<sup>374</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 226.

<sup>375</sup> Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 102-103.

calls the rapier fad a “strange ague,” he plays on a concern that the biological makeup of the English was being infected with the civilized deceitfulness of French and Italian duelists. His sense that England might bastardize itself from its “forefathers’ virtues” is not merely a prodigal son story; Silver sees the rapier as a symptom of Italianate inwardness, a subcutaneous menace that might conform the English to Continental ways and redefine the social landscape along lines of competitive duplicitousness. Throughout this chapter, I shall employ words such as “inwardness” and “interiority” interchangeably with terms such as “duplicity” and “subterfuge,” and by these terms, I mean to invoke the sort of early modern anxieties that separating the inner self from the outer comportment might lead to ruin. As we shall see, the rapier’s emphasis on deceiving the opponent’s guard serves as a fruitful source of tension between the English perception of a unified interior-exterior and the Italianate inwardness that threatened it.

In addition to challenging the prominence of traditional English national identity, rapier experts were, unlike the royally-authorized Masters of Defence, a challenge to the established social order. Rocco Bonetti, for instance, was in England primarily for the purpose of spying on the queen at the behest of Catherine de Medici.<sup>376</sup> Bonetti’s “boy” (probably, but not indisputably, his son), Jeronimo, had engaged in prize duels with Dick Tarleton of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and Robert Greene (of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* fame).<sup>377</sup> Jeronimo would serve as the namesake for the main character of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. The lucrative nature of prize dueling and the shady

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<sup>376</sup> Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 14.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

dealings undergone by these men made them surprisingly upwardly mobile, especially since fencing masters were the social equivalents of actors and magicians.<sup>378</sup> In this cultural reality, fencing figured as an expression of duplicity that seductively earned substantial financial rewards for its practitioners during a time in English history when nationalists were emphasizing a version of manhood that prized forthrightness and plainspoken dealings. The rapier thus challenged notions of English national identity both because it was a popular weapon that hailed from Continental Europe, and because using it properly required the duelist to engage in behaviors that were derided by the arbiters of English manhood. In this environment, anxieties about Machiavellian interiority<sup>379</sup> collided with a weapon that was particularly adept at negotiating success through subterfuge. A concern with matching the interior and exterior evolved into a need to reveal the interior through combat.

Because of the close links between swords and embodiment that I have explored in this work, weapons such as the rapier were not seen merely as fads that oldsters should scoff at; rapier play offered physical evidence of the benefits of Italianate inwardness – and the myriad of deaths and wounds caused by this weapon in the open streets provided deadly consequences for those who failed to exercise the requisite subterfuge to hide their true intentions from their opponents. The rapier teachers themselves emphasized the weapon’s use as defensive in nature, despite plentiful evidence for its offensive abilities, possibly as an attempt to highlight its “noble” uses. Here, we can recognize a specific

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>379</sup> Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1532) was hard to come by in early modern England, but its author had developed a reputation for subterfuge and atheism that translated to the English stage in the figure of the “stage” machiavel.



difference between the rapier and other swords. Rapiers not only occupied a liminal space between the physical body and the social self, they offered an opportunity to separate the two. Swords such as the scimitar announce a truism about their user by communicating a socialized coding (such as race). The rapier, though entrenched in ethnographic prejudices (mainly geared toward Italians and Spaniards), focuses on containing the inner person (through the requisite subterfuge) and the person's innards (through successful guarding). This difference suggests that the rapier's use is to separate the inner person from the physical world, rather than to extend it (as we have seen in other swords). The need to be secretive in using the weapon reinforces the weapon's ability to obfuscate the social self. It is for this reason that polemicists such as Silver find the weapon so controversial: it teaches otherwise candid Englishmen to act like stage machiavels and practice deceit in the traditionally honorable space of the sword duel.

To be certain, the prevalence of rapiers in early modern England corresponded to their heightened appearance on the London stage. One does not need to look far to start finding rapiers in the period's plays. When Sir Toby attempts to get Sir Andrew worked up by describing Viola's fencing prowess in *Twelfth Night*, he insists that:

I had a pass with him, rapier,  
scabbard, and all: and he gives me the stuck in  
with such a mortal motion that it is inevitable... (III.iv.279-281)<sup>380</sup>

In Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, the scholar Lambert challenges his enemy Serlsby to a duel:

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<sup>380</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Twelfth Night*, (London: Thompson Learning, 2002).

I dare thee, coward, to maintain this wrong,  
At dint of rapier, single in the field (X.84-85).<sup>381</sup>

In the opening scene of Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Supervacuo is chided for "running, with a rapier," (IV.iii.a) by Spurio, who insists that onlookers might be suspicious of him for stirring up trouble: "Your arm would be suspected" (IV.iii.2). We even see characters praising the fanciful designs on these delicate weapons in texts such as Middleton's *The Fyve Wittie Gallantes*, in which Fripp fondly speaks of "Andrew Lucifer's rapier and dagger with the embossed girdle and hangars" (I.i.318-319).<sup>382</sup> Because the rapier was such a prevalent weapon in the period, there is much we can learn about its relationship to English definitions of selfhood.

In this chapter, I examine the way the rapier operates in early modern drama as a fecund arm that confounds, rather than announces, a clear relationship between the body and the social self. Unlike the falchion, the sabre, and the dagger, which clearly communicate information about who the swordsman is through the kinetic language of violence, the rapier's emphasis on subterfuge, ploy, and deceit use the body as a smokescreen to obscure the user's true intentions. Here I shall return to each of the critical frameworks that I applied in the previous chapters to demonstrate how each theory functions differently when applied to the rapier. Doing so, I shall show that the kinetic language of violence is not clearly proscriptive; to understand its nuances, we must learn to read each act of combat in context, just as we do with verbal conversations.

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<sup>381</sup> Robert Greene, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002).

<sup>382</sup> Thomas Middleton, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The rapier is the best sword to observe in this way precisely because it helps to hide, rather than emphasize, the ideas that the other swords engage directly. To begin, I shall return to my discussion of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Having demonstrated that our decision to place a sabre in Othello's hand is a product of our modern understanding of race, I hope to show what the rapier that Othello uses to kill himself can teach us about the necessary division between selfhood and physical appearance that underpins early modern racialization. Next, I shall discuss the spectrum of ethnicity that the rapiers in *Romeo and Juliet* reveal in order to highlight the nuances that lie between fads and personality in the early modern mindset. I shall then turn my attention to Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*, in which we see the hidden sense of self that the rapier enacts being used to protect Moll Frith from the sexual advances of London's men. Finally, I shall discuss Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Little French Lawyer*, in which we see a one-armed, one-legged swordsman, Champernell, being shamed when he attempts to stand and duel two roaring boys. The event highlights the rapier's ability to separate the body from the self by showing that early modern culture expected people with disabilities to preserve their honor internally by practicing stoicism. We see in the scene an example of the rapier being better used at the side of a wounded warrior than in the hand of a person with an impairment.

### The Rapier Difference

The main reason the rapier was viewed as dishonest when compared to other swords was that, unlike many of the medieval swords that saw continued use in the early

modern period, rapiers relied on trickery and slyness. Rapier manuals from all across Europe emphasize the duelist's ability to hide his true intentions in order to succeed in combat. For instance, the French fencing master Henry de Saint-Didier attempts to locate the fighter's will in the sword's blade, suggesting that the exterior was capable of masking an internal deceit. Advising his student to watch the point of the sword instead of its blade, Saint-Didier asserts that "the reason for deciding on one of the strikes is that the exterior, which is the point of the sword, is guided and directed by the interior, which is the will, and the point of the sword, which is the exterior, cannot know to be so useful that the eyes and by consequence the sight judges [sic.] the strike to gain tempo."<sup>383</sup> Like a person's wit, the sword's intentions are ultimately obfuscated from sight, and the fencer is required to watch the exterior movements in order to determine truth. This sense that the sword determines truth is not unique to France; instead, it seems to be a consequence of the honor duel's ability to show one's righteousness. Vincentio Saviolo explains, for instance, that:

For by the rule and precept of this Art, men are taught by how much they are resolute in courage, and skillful use of the same weapon, by so much the more to shew themselves virtuous, humble, and modest, both in speech & action, and not to be liars, vaunters or quarrelers, for those in this sort demean themselves... Do commonly carry away wounds and dishonor, and sometimes death.<sup>384</sup>

The sword becomes a connective tissue between the inner and outer person, revealing the insides by either piercing or preserving the outside. Those who exhibit noble qualities internally are preserved in a fight, while those who are cowardly or dishonorable suffer

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<sup>383</sup> Saint-Didier, *Secrets of the Sword Alone* (Montreal: LongEdge Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>384</sup> Vincentio Saviolo, *Master of Defence* (London: John Wolfe, 1595), B1-B2.

for the dissonance between their outer goodness and their inner depravity. We see in this dynamic a tension exerted by the rapier between interior and exterior (causing it to serve, as I have argued in previous chapters, as a “fecund arm” located between bodily and social realities). Engaging in honor duels was meant to expose the truth in a disagreement – the winner of the fight was held to be the most virtuous. The very premise of this system, however, demonstrates how little faith English aristocrats placed in the honesty and forthrightness of their countrymen. The change between earlier models and those of the period was based around the benefits of study. As Turner and Soper point out, “It was thought that God granted victory to the just; therefore, to the medieval mind, no amount of study would change God’s will.”<sup>385</sup> While the same notion of divine intervention played out in the early modern period, the rapier was situated culturally as a fighting method to be learned and practiced. Despite the belief that God would award the victory, the weapon required an almost baroque delicacy of technique, and fencing masters brought this specialized set of skills to interested users because it was believed that failing to practice could guarantee defeat.

The tension the rapier highlighted between the fighter’s true intentions and his or her body language carries so far in these manuals that, when Giacomo di Grassi (1594) discusses an exercise in which the sword’s point is reversed (carrying the sword in what a dagger fighter would call the ‘icepick’ grip – see Chapter Seconde), he calls it “false play.”<sup>386</sup> As he explains:

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<sup>385</sup> Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 3.

<sup>386</sup> We can see the origins of the phrase “playing false” here.

And because it hath many times happened them, either with a false thrust or edge blow, to hurt or abuse the enemy, they become lofty, and presume thereon as though their blows were not to be warded. But yet, for the most part, it falleth out that, by... having only a good stomach and stout courage, they are chopped in with a thrust, and so miserable slain... And as for these falses or slips, they must use them for their exercise & pastimes' sake only.<sup>387</sup>

Playing false, according to di Grassi, leads to destruction because the fencer is quite literally unable to find (and, by extension, “get to”) the point. The choice of terminology is not incidental; the fight manuals reify direct play, what di Grassi calls “true” play, even though use of the rapier is predicated upon hiding one’s true intentions. The division between interior and exterior becomes even more clear in this example because the point (or exterior) of the sword is physically placed behind the interior (or wit). Nicoletto Giganti (1608) praises methods that are, in his own words, “so deceitful that he won’t be able to defend.”<sup>388</sup> The manuals give one the sense that a Machiavellian interiority, in which one’s intentions are knowable only to God, not only relies on a division between intention and outer signs, but accepts and reifies it. “In other words,” writes Katharine Eisaman Maus, “law ignores unacted desires not because wicked secrets are rare, but rather because they are universal.”<sup>389</sup> The rapier manages the divisions between intentions and body language in a particularly literal, real-world way that produced anxiety in the minds of English nationalists.

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<sup>387</sup> Giacomo Di Grassi, *EEBO Editions: Giacomo Di Grassi His True Arte of Defence*, (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2010), Aa1r.

<sup>388</sup> Nicoletto Giganti, *Venetian Rapier: The School, or Salle* (Wheaton: Freelance Academy Press, Inc., 2010), 50.

<sup>389</sup> Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 108.

Rapier masters not only insisted upon hiding one's intentions; they declaimed against the alternative. For instance, Vincentio Saviolo (1595), the famous master of the rapier and dagger, describes an affected behavior on the part of rapier swordsmen in the introduction to his book. Declaiming against the "roaring boys" of the period, Saviolo insists that "This manner of proceeding and behavior doth plainly show that these men (although peradventure they have learned the use of the weapon) have not been sufficiently instructed in the Art of Arms."<sup>390</sup> A true gentleman, in the words of almost every fencing manual of the period, is one who can control the scandalous outpouring of emotion or words that separates manhood from boyishness. Those who challenged these injunctions against roaring,<sup>391</sup> as Alexandra Shepard describes, "openly flouted the rules expected to govern their behaviour, leaving a trail of offense and destruction."<sup>392</sup> Hiding emotions and intentions is a way of life for the fencer, despite the cultural anxieties that surrounded such obfuscation. At its best, guardedness manifests as self-control that could help contain one's baser urges; at its worst, it works like lying or deceit. Saviolo defines two parts to sword training – the mechanics ("use of the weapon") and the deportment ("Art of Arms"). Camillo Agrippa (1553), one of the original masters of fence, argues for a tripartite system: "The science of arms consists principally of justice, secondly of knowledge, and thirdly of practice."<sup>393</sup> Sword trainers frequently coupled the warrior's behavior with his training. A swordsman learned the mechanical use of the sword – that

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<sup>390</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, B2.

<sup>391</sup> Boisterous posturing and destruction of property associated with immature fencers.

<sup>392</sup> Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 94.

<sup>393</sup> Camillo Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* (Ithaca: Ithaca Press, 2009), 7.

is, the complex series of kinetic actions that comprise sword-based combat, as well as a warrior's code not unlike chivalry or bushido. As Jennifer Low explains, "Honor, then, can be understood as the spiritual component of physical strength."<sup>394</sup> The tension at the heart of pro- or anti- rapier debates was the tension between study (the mechanics of the sword) and honor (the state of being ascribed to the swordsman).

Not everyone saw the rapier's versatility and emphasis on self-control as a positive thing, however. George Silver's main criticism of the rapier is that its methodology is a fungible one; the fact that so many rapier masters have different opinions about correct usage demonstrates an underlying insecurity in the style.<sup>395</sup> Even proponents of the rapier see its use as versatile (in a positive light) or changeable (in a negative one). The pivot on which this disagreement hinges is that the rapier can be coupled with various secondary weapons. Saviolo describes a difference between the rapier solo, rapier and cloak, rapier and dagger, and rapier and buckler.<sup>396</sup> He goes further by placing a value judgment on the choice of pairings – the rapier alone is more honorable than any pairings, because "the rapier is it which sheweth who are men of arms and of honor, and which obtaineth right for those who are wronged."<sup>397</sup> Though the other manuals do not moralize on specific weapons the way Saviolo does, weapons like the rapier and cloak emphasize obfuscation, rather than revelation, as Giacomo di Grassi outlines. He offers a strategy whereby the cloak arm binds the rapier in a high ward

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<sup>394</sup> Jennifer A. Low, *Manhood and the Duel: Masculinity in Early Modern Drama and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 98.

<sup>395</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 206.

<sup>396</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, D1-2.

<sup>397</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, D2.



(thereby blocking the line of sight behind the hanging cloth), and the sword is thrust through it: “delivering a thrust therewithal underneath, with the increase of a pace of the right foot.”<sup>398</sup> Saviolo, whose manual precedes that of Silver, anticipates Silver’s argument that rapier combat’s variance represents a degree of indecisiveness in its teachers. He asserts that, like precious stones or painters, some sword masters’ teachings are worth more than others’.<sup>399</sup> Regardless of which master is right, both Saviolo and Silver demonstrate a common period trope – the rapier, like its users, was quickly changing and fashionable, but neither stable nor consistent. In the period, manly maturity was linked to stability, while indecisiveness and instability were seen as boyish or womanly. Period thinkers linked this instability of purpose with a lack of rationality or self-control.<sup>400</sup> All of these factors made the rapier seem to be more fashionable than practical in the same way that ridiculous fashion might produce scoffs from more pragmatic citizens.

While the changeable nature of rapier combat is certainly one reason that men such as Silver saw it as inferior, another of the main reasons Englishmen saw the sword as a sign of moral inferiority was its Continental origin. Silver anachronistically and unfavorably pits the French, Italian, and Spanish fencers against the English king, Henry V.<sup>401</sup> Many English saw the rapier as an imported, foreign fashion. This thought process led to xenophobic associations, which came with a whole hierarchy of “foreignness.” The Earl of Oxford, for example, hated the influence of men like Rocco Bonetti to an extreme

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<sup>398</sup> Di Grassi, *True Art*, 11r.

<sup>399</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, D1.

<sup>400</sup> Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 56.

<sup>401</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 203.

degree. There is evidence suggesting that the earl hired assassins to kill the fencing master in a duel. Bonetti wisely refused based on his social rank, but eventually had to seek the aid of the Privy Council because he was issued challenges at every turn. The council gave him the power to name names, and charged the mayor of London to arrest any men whom Bonetti accused.<sup>402</sup> Even within rapier schools, the style influenced the way the sword was treated. Adolph L. Soens demonstrates that the Italian / French style was very different from the Spanish style, and that English audiences were sensitive to those differences. He defines a hierarchy – the English had no rapier style of their own, but the “more” English style came from the French, who in turn used a similar style to the Italians. The Spanish style, in contrast, was considered more foreign than the Franco-Italian styles.<sup>403</sup> Therefore, a vaguely defined spectrum of Englishness codified various swords and techniques. The wide spectrum of variations between different styles played directly into notions of embodiment; the way one used a rapier associated the user with certain ethnic heritages in ways that reciprocated embodiment and heritage.

### Rapiers Across Europe

Because of the rapier’s ubiquity, it is necessary for any complete discussion of the rapier in Europe to include a thorough overview of the history surrounding the sword. One aspect of rapier combat that was likely true of other weapons, but cannot be expressed in the scope of this project because of a lack of relevant fight manuals, is that each country produced unique methodologies, or “schools,” of fencing. What this meant

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<sup>402</sup> Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 16.

<sup>403</sup> Soens, “Tybalt’s Spanish Fencing,” 122.

was that a fighter's training could be easily identified from the stance and ethos with which he or she approached combat. In the same way that we see early modern plays referring to a "French doublet" and expecting the audience to know what that implies, rapier combat was distinct enough among the different schools that the same could be said of many continental countries. I shall attempt to summarize the distinctions between each school here, as these distinctions will bear out in my analyses below. As a rule, English fencing was an amalgamation of different rapier schools; in the case of two of London's published fencing masters, one – Vincentio Saviolo – was Italian-English, and the other – Giacomo di Grassi – was an Italian master whose book existed only in a recent English translation. For that reason, we do not hear of references to English fencing as such; rather, London was the place where many different styles intermingled. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the English experienced so much anxiety about the rapier's use. Knowing what we know about Elizabethan fencing allows us to conclude that the playhouses served as a showcase of many different fighting styles. As I discuss the fencing styles below, I shall briefly refer to moments when we can see references to different ethnic fighting styles. Doing so will allow me to demonstrate how much care and attention early modern playwrights gave to the intricate details of different rapier schools. In turn, this will help contextualize the discussions that follow.

The most commonly codified fencing style in Europe hails from Italy. Although the sword itself hails from Spain, one of the earliest and most influential manuals was Camillo Agrippa's 1553 treatise. Agrippa's influence took the Milanese fencer far; he

even made friends with the artist Michaelangelo.<sup>404</sup> In Italian fencing manuals like Agrippa's, we see more than a passing connection between Renaissance art styles and the art of the duel; Italian fencers attempted to apply mathematics and geometry to the use of a sword in ways that we see less frequently in French and English treatises. Italian fencing always calls for a wide, low stance, with an emphasis on balancing the center of gravity, though different masters achieve that stance differently. Agrippa has his fencer leaning forward, pulling the body out of harm's way, but exposing the face. The lower stance, as Agrippa highlights, allows the fencer's weapon to travel farther forward, giving him an advantage.<sup>405</sup> Nicoletto Giganti, Agrippa's Venetian counterpart, likewise favors a forward-leaning, aggressive stance as a means by which the fighter can reach as far as possible. As he explains, "if you stand in a good guard and are alert, you will be able to thwart his attack with a strong, positive parry, to deliver a thrust to his face and to safely recover out of measure with your sword above his."<sup>406</sup> The Italian masters best known to London, however, counter this trend. Di Grassi still advocates for a wide stance, but his woodcuts show the fencer leaning farther back, protecting the head at the expense of the body.<sup>407</sup> Meanwhile, Saviolo's examples show the fencers spreading their feet wide, again, but erect, as in Di Grassi. Italian fencing was more complex than its French counterpart, employing at least twice as many cuts and a plethora of thrusts. Despite the prevalence of cuts, Italian fencers like di Grassi regularly assert that the thrust is better

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<sup>404</sup> Agrippa, *Fencing*, xxii.

<sup>405</sup> Agrippa, *Fencing*, 11.

<sup>406</sup> Giganti, *Venetian Rapier*, 29.

<sup>407</sup> Di Grassi, *His True Art*, Glr.

than the cut, because “he that is nearest, hitteth soonest.”<sup>408</sup> The most famous examples of Italian fencing references in early modern drama exist in *Romeo and Juliet*, discussed in detail below, but we also see references in Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humor*, among others.

French fencing, unlike Italian fencing, emphasized simplicity over complexity. Only one French master codified his school, Henry de Saint-Didier. Saint-Didier tells a story about two men, named Fabrice and Jules, who came to France in order to challenge him to a duel. Saint-Didier asks them first to name the possible strikes with a sword, and the long list they give includes Italian terms such as the “*imbroccata*” and the “*Riverso*.”<sup>409</sup> He then proceeds to outline the main difference between French and Italian fencing – the French had economized the possible attacks down to variations on three basic maneuvers.<sup>410</sup> For this reason, French fencing was much more serviceable, but perhaps the least flashy of all. Italian fencing actually emphasized its own baroque complexity, seeking attacks that may not have been as effective as possible as long as they were, by Nicoletto Giganti’s description, “the most difficult but also the most beautiful.”<sup>411</sup> We learn in *Hamlet* that Laertes has been practicing fencing in the French court, and will be bringing his foreign fencing style home to Denmark for the duel with Hamlet. Meanwhile, we see a complicated joke in *Henry V*, in which the French king sends Henry a treasure chest full of tennis balls as a challenge to the king. French fencing was equated with playing tennis; Saint-Didier “considers that tennis and swordsmanship

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<sup>408</sup> Di Grassi, *True Art*, A2r.

<sup>409</sup> Saint-Didier, *Secrets*, 12.

<sup>410</sup> Saint-Didier, *Secrets*, 13.

<sup>411</sup> Giganti, *The School*, 47.

are very close cousins...whoever well knows how to play tennis easily can learn to throw sword strikes.”<sup>412</sup> The associations between French fencing and tennis allow Shakespeare to pun directly on the same notion that writers such as Silver were putting forth about the rapier: it is a toy, used in sport, rather than a serious weapon.

Spanish fencing was viewed in England as the most reliable form of all.<sup>413</sup> George Silver begrudgingly referred to Spanish fencing techniques as “perfect,”<sup>414</sup> despite his clear distaste for the rapier generally. The rapier is often thought to have originated in Spain, specifically tying their history to that of the *espada ropera*, or plainclothes sword.<sup>415</sup> Spanish fencing was notably more erect and mathematical than all the others, and was taught to the tempo of music, which made it seem dancelike.<sup>416</sup> Christopher Sly, one of Shakespeare’s actors, was notably schooled in Spanish fencing, and one of Spain’s most well-known fencers, Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez, is directly referenced in the writings of Jonson, Fletcher, and Massinger.<sup>417</sup>

#### “That’s a Fable”: Othello’s Internal Rapier

In the last chapter, I discussed how our understanding of race in the modern world has led us to equip Othello erroneously with a sabre. Now, I shall discuss what we lose when Othello is not equipped with Shakespeare’s intended rapier. Mary Floyd-Wilson sees Othello’s suicide as an attempt to destroy the Machiavellian inwardness that Iago

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<sup>412</sup> Saint, Didier, *Secrets*, 89.

<sup>413</sup> Sadly, the only current English translation of a Spanish fencing text is prohibitively rare, and therefore does not appear in this chapter.

<sup>414</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 213.

<sup>415</sup> Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 5.

<sup>416</sup> Soens, “Tybalt’s Spanish Fencing,” 125.

<sup>417</sup> Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 6.

has taught him.<sup>418</sup> Conversely, I take the side that Iago has spent the play teaching Othello racism, condescendingly reiterating the idea that Othello's skin is a sign of inner darkness, even though he does not believe it himself. When Othello kills himself, he is killing *outwardness*, not inwardness – he has learned from Iago to hate his own body, and so he acts against it in order to separate his Western interior from his African shell. We presuppose the racism in Shakespeare's play, but with the rapier, we see racism being introduced Othello's world, and we can understand the cost of it very clearly in his suicide. The teacher-student relationship projected onto Iago and Othello in this moment is significant because this explains why Othello needs to be an African Moor, rather than a Turkish Moor. As I discussed in the last chapter, Turks were pre-programmed, culturally speaking, Africans were viewed, much like the maps of Africa itself that were circulated during the period, as blank spaces, waiting to be written upon by Europeans. Ania Loomba explains this process: "as the nations of Christian Europe initiated their attempts to conquer and shape other people in their own image, what we call modern racism was born."<sup>419</sup> We must, therefore, view the play not only in terms of Othello's race, but also in terms of Iago's Italian ancestry. The paternalistic notion that plays out in *Othello* is steeped in the idea that Italians had cultivated a Machiavellian inwardness. Iago is not motivated by random malignancy; his interiority is motivated by humoral inheritance, as I have already discussed.<sup>420</sup> In this sense, Othello's integration into Venetian society has become physiologically thorough, but the cost of learning such

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<sup>418</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 156.

<sup>419</sup> Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>420</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 142-143.

inwardness is the suspicion that others are practicing it, too. The only way Othello's African "nature" comes into play is in that he is *too fixed* into a single pattern of behavior, one that neither the English nor the Italians were thought to exhibit. Fixity becomes a liability for Othello, as the Italianate inwardness challenges his biological proclivities, and the division he experiences as a result makes his inner self unknowable, even to him. In order to recover his loss of self, Othello attempts to destroy his body as a means of spilling the soul – a convention that dates back at least to *The Aeneid*.

The suicide scene shows us exactly how important it is that Othello *cannot* carry a sabre. In the scene, the weapons are hotly contested by the characters, and there is no reason to believe that Shakespeare would create such complicated blocking unless it was important to the end of the play. In the last chapter, I explain exactly how this exchange takes place, and while I acknowledge that the blocking itself makes Shakespeare's plans for the scene difficult to excavate, I stand by my assertion that the "Spanish sword" is a rapier. This becomes particularly important because the lack of flexibility caused by Othello's African biology would make it difficult for him to use a rapier, according to the writings of the masters. Giacomo Di Grassi sees rapier combat as an exercise in personal flexibility; as he puts it, "it is necessary that he can as well manage the left hand as the right, which thing shall be (if not necessary) yet most profitable in every other kind of weapon... he which is not much practiced and exercised therein... shall find himself to be utterly deceived."<sup>421</sup> Hiding one's true intentions, in almost every rapier manual, is the key to this sort of flexibility. The foundation of a duel is to interpret the plans of the

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<sup>421</sup> Di Grassi, *True Art*, M4v-r.



opponent while hiding one's own. Saint-Didier describes this in military terms: the point of learning to use a rapier is "to defend our body and honour, as does a camp master who has a camp of 100 or 50,000 men."<sup>422</sup> As for Othello, Floyd-Wilson argues that once Othello succumbs to jealousy, born because of his newly Italianate imprinting, he cannot redirect his own course.<sup>423</sup> The rapier challenges this notion, however, because recalling Saint-Didier's idea that the sword's point is the outside, and therefore directed by the inside (the will), can help demonstrate how Othello actually seeks a straighter course. The inwardness he receives of Italy causes him too much dissonance between the body and the self; killing himself is a means by which he reunifies the will with the body.

When Othello tries to leave the bedchamber (presumably to chase Iago down), he tells Gratiano to look at him, "naked as I am."<sup>424</sup> While the overt meaning is clearly that Othello is lying about being unarmed, his line also suggests a kind of openness and honesty that, while applicable to him in the beginning of the play, is now lost by the end. Like the unsheathed (and therefore, also naked) sword in his hand, Othello has lain claim on the subtlety of Italianate mannerisms, both in sword and in personality. When Gratiano finds him armed, Othello describes his rapier pointedly: "A better never did itself sustain / Upon a soldier's thigh."<sup>425</sup> What makes the weapon so great is its capacity, as Othello notes, to overcome obstacles. For Othello's interior self, the body becomes his own greatest obstacle. The racism Iago has taught Othello declaims against his skin, and the only thing that continues to position him within European society is his now-hidden

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<sup>422</sup> Saint-Didier, *Secrets*, 13.

<sup>423</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 154.

<sup>424</sup> V.ii.256

<sup>425</sup> V.ii.258-259

self. Katharine Eisaman Maus' descriptions of inwardness in early modern England suggest that retreating internally may be a way to maintain power over ones' self: "To 'know' something as we have seen abundantly elsewhere, means to obtain power over it by gaining access to its inside."<sup>426</sup> When Othello describes the rapier as the "very sea-mark of my utmost sail"<sup>427</sup> just before he kills himself, this metaphor becomes a ghastly reality on the stage. If Othello's "utmost sail" is his soul, in other words, that which steers the ship, the sword quite literally serves the same purpose of a water-mark as he coats it in his blood. The humoral discord Iago has injected into Othello has buried Othello's true nature beneath the trappings of his own body, and he uses the weapon to release the interior into the world, regaining power over his social and physical self by reintegrating the two into a single entity.

As I have been arguing, choosing an inherently European weapon like the rapier allows Othello to emphasize the Westernized aspects of his personality. The Turk comes to the English stage, pre-inscribed with Muslim religious beliefs and the kinds of libidinous affluence the English saw in such figures. The very fact that Othello chooses such a specifically Western sword helps us understand his suicide as a commentary on the danger of Italianate interiority, not on the unruliness of Moorish others. I would suggest that attempts to turn Othello into a Turk are inspired by more-recent notions of race, ones that characterize Africans more similarly to Turks than early modern notions did. Othello started life as a blank, and his being the Moor "of Venice" has been

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<sup>426</sup> Maus, *Inwardness*, 193.

<sup>427</sup> V.ii.266

dependent, from the very beginning of the play, on his ability to “speak unbonneted.”<sup>428</sup>

As Iago severs Othello’s honesty and forthrightness by emphasizing the Christian division between body and soul, Othello loses his Moorish coding, becoming a Venetian in the process. When Othello recognizes the havoc this jealousy and secrecy cause him, especially as his body itself becomes the covering he rejects earlier in the play (the “bonnet”), the suicide offers him an opportunity to deal with Iago’s meddling on an almost medical level.

The caveat to the notion that the rapier requires deception was that the person who telegraphs his or her intents – in other words, the person whose intentions are evident – is most frequently the loser in a duel. Because of his faltering existential unity, Othello uses the sword to become what Katherine Maus might term a “mind so thoroughly guilty that its inward imaginings spill over into the visible, tangible world.”<sup>429</sup> The word “spill” is particularly useful in Othello’s case because we start to see *both* Othellos at the same time. The associations of subtlety ascribed to the sword serve to support the thesis in Othello’s final, convoluted essay on who he is. His final speech complicates his ethnic position by simultaneously aligning him with both the Turk and the Christian who conquers him in battle:

...Set you down this,  
And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk

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<sup>428</sup> I.ii.23

<sup>429</sup> Maus, *Inwardness*, 111.

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him – thus!        *He stabs himself.*<sup>430</sup>

Othello calls to mind the early modern dissonance between outer body and inner self in this moment, using his carnal body to reproduce an act of combat he has enacted once before.

Othello's suicide becomes an act of combat in this figuration, and the use of the rapier punctuates the story his body tells. If the body is the *Moor* of Venice, then using the Western rapier makes Othello the Moor of *Venice*. If the interior Othello is in control of the hand, then is he not the Moor-killer, rather than the Moor? The suicide allows Othello to assert an identity that is at once "both" and "neither" Moor and/nor Christian. The agency Othello acquires is less about domination over the Turk – a type of dominance he has spent his career asserting – than it is about acquiring dominion over his own black body, a body that becomes black to him only when he dissociates his inner self from the flesh. Recalling Saint-Didier's notion that the sword has an interior and exterior reminds us that, by reversing his sword and falling on it, Othello is piercing his own exterior (his body) with the point of the sword (also indicative of exteriority). Because his self (in an early modern context indicated by the spirit or soul) is the guiding agent of his own body, Othello is, at least mechanically speaking, forcing exteriority into the place where interiority resides, thereby redistributing his interior onto the floor of the chamber. Rather than seeing this moment as a war against interiority, we might better understand the suicide as an act of racialization that ultimately rejects race by rejecting

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<sup>430</sup> V.iii.349-354

the body. Because the sword occupies a liminal space between the body and the social self, repurposing it from connective tissue to destructive invader redistributes the once-clear lines between body and self.

In turn, Othello seeks a truer version of himself by seeking inside himself, literally speaking, with the sword. Even as he asserts his inner man as being Western beyond his African origins, Othello's body leaks the products of Eastern lands:

...of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinable gum.<sup>431</sup>

Othello juxtaposes images of magical Arabian trees with an act of European violence against the people of that region. If at any point Othello is, as Daniel Vitkus would have it, simultaneously Turk and African, this is the moment. He asserts that "More than being identified with any specific ethnic label, Othello is a theatrical embodiment of the dark, threatening powers at the edge of Christendom."<sup>432</sup> I would contend, however, that Othello reverses this more-typical reading of Moorish Otherness by highlighting the danger to those peoples posed by European expansion. Mary Floyd Wilson has already suggested that Iago is, in fact, the Turk – not Othello.<sup>433</sup> By imposing jealousy on Othello, Iago imposes a hyper-developed *civilization* (the same sort of civilization that the rapier evoked in the minds of nervous English polemicists). Northerners, by contrast,

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<sup>431</sup> V.iii.346-349

<sup>432</sup> Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 90.

<sup>433</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 156.

were seen as barbaric, and it was thought that hypercivilized groups (jealousy being a sign of this hypercivilization) could use the benefit of a more English kind of savagery.<sup>434</sup> The English earnestness was viewed as resistant to the corrupting interior effects of emotions like jealousy: “Jealousy clouds the judgment and rules the senses but also intensifies the mind’s capacity for self-scrutiny.”<sup>435</sup> The medicine that leaks out of Arabian trees and Moorish eyes is the interiority that Iago teaches the citizens of Cypress to employ, and the danger it poses to the African Othello is the same danger it poses to the English audience. In the last chapter, I explained that, when the jealousy starts to take hold of Othello, Iago sees his success as a medical one: “Work on, / My medicine, work” (IV.i.44-45). Medically speaking, Othello’s interiority is divided from the exterior, and only the negative effects, Iago’s “medicine,” are acting on the body. In his attempt to confuse the binaristic division between body and self, Othello employs the fecund arm of the rapier to confound the divisions between the body and the self.

Othello lays claim on a Roman, masculine autonomy in the act of suicide, and the use of the Spanish blade further grounds the killing act in European philosophical contexts.<sup>436</sup> Reading Othello’s final speech in light of the kinetic language of violence highlights one of the uncomfortable arguments Shakespeare makes in the text. What we see, mechanically, is a Moor killing himself in the Roman fashion with a European weapon. He punctuates his ethnic confusion with an act of self-slaughter that kills the

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>436</sup> Jennifer Feather ascribes to suicide a form of interiorized, Roman agency: “violence forges relationships and becomes the source of agency understood not as the rational action of an autonomous will but as the action of a subject created in and through bodily interactions and, especially, through violent interactions.” Jennifer Feather, *The Pen and the Sword* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 62.

Moor, but “saves” the man. The implications of this moment are that the only way Othello can reconcile his racially-infused<sup>437</sup> body with his Westernized soul is to confuse the division between the two halves. In early modern terms, Iago’s lessons on inwardness have infused corruption into Othello’s body, and bloodletting is the only medicinal way to fix the problem. As Gail Kern Paster has pointed out, “Bloodletting was in fact regarded as a therapy for excessive anger.”<sup>438</sup> Performing terminal surgery on himself, Othello challenges the notion that an interior self can exist divorced from the carnal realities of the body through an act of autonomous, masculine suicide. When he says that he “...took by th’ throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him – thus,” he is not only reenacting the act of past violence that I mentioned earlier. He ascribes to his body a poorly contained, leaky Otherness, then, upon recognizing that the ship is lost, he burns it on his way overboard. Killing Othello in this way, Shakespeare recreates an imperialist model. As Bartels explains, the drive to initiate trade with Africa began as an attempt to “protect” them from the evils of continental Europeans.<sup>439</sup> As I argue in the previous chapter, Iago’s colonialist imprinting of the vices of the Mediterranean region upon Othello is what spells his ultimate doom. The Moor’s death is the only way that the imperialists in an English audience could be satisfied with the Moor’s *containment*.

When he kills Iago, Othello directly points out the confusion between his inner and outer selves:

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<sup>437</sup> I use the term “infused” here on purpose, because it is Iago who infuses racism, as I have described.

<sup>438</sup> Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1993), 97.

<sup>439</sup> Emily Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 55.

What's he that was Othello? here I am...  
I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable.<sup>440</sup>

In this moment, Othello points out a clear division between the Othello that is dead and the one who still remains. The body is a “fable” to him; Othello sees his inner self as still present, but his body is either destined for death or already there. Looking down at his feet – presumably bare, as he has just sneaked into the room – he sees the body and with it, the near-inescapability of his corporeal form. When Othello kills himself, Cassio comments that he was afraid this would happen, but thought he “had no weapon, / For he was great of heart.”<sup>441</sup> Just as the characters spend most of the play not being able to penetrate Iago’s Machiavellian veneer, Cassio’s comment demonstrates a similar imbedded quality to Othello’s selfhood. Until now, Othello has been decidedly visible, inside and out, and knowable by the other characters. Having attained a perspective that does not rely on union between body and soul, Othello sees his body as the humorally imbalanced vessel that it is, and chooses to hate the color of his skin as Iago has taught Brabantio and Roderigo to do. Othello recognizes the disposability that Smith sees in early modern stage blackface, throwing out his black shell (be it the blackface from the stage or the African body that belongs to the character) in order to save the “true” man (and the white actor, in the staging sense) beneath. The sword shows us, however, that Othello is willing to collapse these distinctions as penance for killing Desdemona. Rather than insisting on a racialized body and simply tossing it out, Othello uses the rapier to collapse simple embodied distinctions, turning jealousy and duplicity in on itself and

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<sup>440</sup> V.ii.281, 283

<sup>441</sup> V.ii.358-359



allowing it to collapse under its own gravity. When we arm Othello with a sabre, we replicate the racist assumptions that underlie our modern understanding of race, and as I discussed in the last chapter, our sabres become a character-flattening blackface that undermines the play. Arming Othello with a rapier, conversely, allows us to resist the urge to differentiate Othello from the Venetians even more than Shakespeare already did 400 years ago.

#### “Will You Walk”: The Stratification of Swords in *Romeo and Juliet*

Part of the reason rapiers gained such a reputation for being reliant on deceit has to do with the different disciplines behind them and other weapons. In *Romeo and Juliet*, we see comparisons not only between the knightly swords of ages past, but also between the different European fencing disciplines. The use of a wide range of different styles demonstrates a prevalent anxiety in the text regarding ethnicity, particularly because even for the more-sympathetic characters such as Romeo, performance of ethnicity becomes unsuccessful more often than not. By examining the spectrum of ethnicity that the play's different fighting styles highlights, I shall show the various stages of ethnic corruption that Shakespeare delineates in his very deliberate distribution of various European rapier schools. We begin to see the decline of Verona as a result of the deception and subterfuge that dominates its culture, and the rapier, as a trendy weapon with clear ties to the duplicity at the root of the city's woes, enacts directly the supplanting of more-traditional weapons (and with the weapons, disrupting traditional family values, just as Silver fears it might) and the deaths of duelists who employ it. The rapiers in *Romeo and Juliet* trace

a direct connection between the adoption of foreign customs and the up-ending of civilization.

At the center of the spectrum of ethnicity that dominates the play is a sword we never see: the long sword. As a basis for English notions of self-identification, the long sword was “as much a status symbol as a weapon. Forging a long blade that would not shatter or bend in combat was an expert skill and so a sword was consequently an expensive item.”<sup>442</sup> The long sword was generally handed down from generation to generation and was blade-heavy, which facilitated cuts<sup>443</sup> better than thrusts.<sup>444</sup> The weight of the long sword was such that an enemy could die from ferocious bludgeoning – even if the armor was merely dented, rather than penetrated.<sup>445</sup> In one infamous example, King Henry VIII petitioned Francis I of France to allow the English long sword to be part of the tournament held at the “Field of the Cloth of Gold” peace summit, but Francis rejected the proposition because no gauntlet at the time could protect the fighter’s hand from the weapon’s crushing power.<sup>446</sup> The cut-centric use of the long sword, coupled with the sheer strength required to wield it properly, demonstrated a great deal of machismo on the part of the warrior. Using the sword to cut – one might say “swat” or “batter” – down an enemy’s defenses is a very direct business. In short, the long swordsman fights in a straightforward, aggressive manner.

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<sup>442</sup> Martin J. Dougherty, *Weapons & Fighting Techniques of the Medieval Warrior: 1,000 – 1,500 AD* (New York: Metro Books, 2008), 44.

<sup>443</sup> I define a “cut” as an attack which uses the edge of the blade. For instance, a chopping motion would produce a cut.

<sup>444</sup> I define a “thrust” as an attack using the point of the weapon, such as a lunge.

<sup>445</sup> Dougherty, *Fighting Techniques*, 44.

<sup>446</sup> Alfred Hutton, *Old Sword Play: Techniques of the Great Masters* (New York: Dover, 2001), 3.

Unlike the long sword, the rapier is a fast-moving weapon of finesse. Light and agile, the weapon is versatile and dangerous – “it is made with two edges and one point.”<sup>447</sup> Saviolo ascribes a metaphorical significance to the rapier’s double edge – the blade can cut both the user and the opponent<sup>448</sup> – which, in turn, makes it useful for demonstrating who is right in the fight because it is potentially dangerous to both the user and the target.<sup>449</sup> George Silver, the short sword master, cites this fact as evidence for the rapier’s inferiority to the short sword: “two captains at Southampton... ran with their rapiers one at the other & were both slain.”<sup>450</sup> The rapier, unlike the long sword, is meant for agile, deceptive fighting. This codification of the moralistic nature of weaponry becomes a trope throughout the period’s fencing manuals.

As I mentioned in the last chapter, Shakespeare very directly associates different characters with different weapons and styles in *Romeo and Juliet*. Old Capulet, upon finding a duel about to erupt outside his house, calls not for a rapier, but a long sword: “Give me my long sword, ho” (I.i.73) By calling for this very English weapon of war, Capulet identifies himself with the “old guard” of knightly nobility. More than this, however, the fact that Capulet calls for a long sword brings to light a break in the traditional inheritance of martial honor – that inherent, rather than received, honor which Low describes as “honor natural.”<sup>451</sup> Honor that can be passed down is inherently exterior to the person who receives it, but honor natural is intrinsic to the social self. Old Capulet

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<sup>447</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, D2.

<sup>448</sup> The double-edged sword becomes a conventional metaphor for the sword that hurts both user and target. See Hebrews 4:12, in which the author compares the tongue to a sword.

<sup>449</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, D2.

<sup>450</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 209.

<sup>451</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 98.

still retains his sword, which he would have handed down to his successors, according to tradition. The sword, though never onstage, becomes a symbol for a broken lineage of warrior culture, one which has been supplanted by the younger generation with its swift-moving rapiers. On some level, the fact that the blade was never inherited shows us that traditional honor has died in Shakespeare's Verona. The old ways, now lost, take a position offstage, and when Capulet summons this quasi-ancient weapon to his side, his wife stops him, insisting that he receive a crutch, instead (I.i.74). The hyper-masculine ways of the past are incapacitated, much like the old man who would resurrect them to protect himself. His wife, subverting his authority as the *paterfamilias*, only further demonstrates a kind of none-too-subtle loss of agency. Because Old Capulet's received honor has always been tied to exteriority, old age has the ability to wither his honor – and in this case, it seems that this is so. Because he cannot fight, Capulet's situation demonstrates that he has imperfectly maintained what Alexandra Shepard describes as the “hot vigor of youth.”<sup>452</sup> Shepard connects the ages of man with Galenic humoralism, and the behavior of the warrior is that of a young man; it is hot-blooded and changeable.<sup>453</sup> Capulet's inclination to fight, and his call for a weapon of war to stop the duelists, is inappropriate because it is undermined by his age; and we see that his direct methods of dealing with problems are not compatible with Venice's social landscape. Consider Capulet's attempts to console Tybalt. When Tybalt starts off to kill Romeo, Capulet incorrectly assumes that the outer and the inner man are equally controllable. He instructs Tybalt to “Show a fair presence and put off these frowns” (I.v.72). Because he

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<sup>452</sup> Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 56.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-64.

represents the bygone ethos of manhood, however, Capulet becomes the symbol for the vestiges of medievalism. He is forthright and quick to fight, but he is also disabled and obsolete. Capulet's loss of clout among the younger men is significant because it demonstrates an upheaval of the traditional English value system. Although "the English reformation reinforced the important role of the head of household, thereby strengthening the regard other family members had for the patriarch,"<sup>454</sup> Capulet's impotence as patriarch, as well as the young men's dismissal of his authority, demonstrate the erosion of traditional English values in Shakespeare's play. If "honor natural" is the better honor, the patriarch's most important function in society, that of passing down the alternative "received honor" to the next generation, becomes unnecessary.

Shakespeare's young men are imbricated in the alternative version of honor – honor natural. In the play, Shakespeare uses fencing styles as an important method of character negotiation, which in turn naturalizes the various European stereotypes of behavior. Each character's warrior ethos is highlighted by his fencing style and because of the rapier's associations with interiority, these differing styles illuminate who the fighter is on the inside. Adolf Soens has actually discussed the ethnic coding of the play's rapier wielders. Tybalt, unlike Mercutio, Romeo, and Benvolio, uses the Spanish style of fighting, which demarcates him as an outsider.<sup>455</sup> More than simply being more foreign than the Montague fighters, however, Tybalt is dangerous with a sword in all of the wrong ways. This fiery temper, according to Soens, foreshadows that he is "heading for

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<sup>454</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 95.

<sup>455</sup> Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing," 122.

trouble.”<sup>456</sup> The Spanish style is designed for use by a cool, even-handed fighter who is in control of his faculties. As he puts it, “The Spaniard in Elizabethan England was notoriously proud, precise, over-grave, affected, and melancholy... a cool, formal, precise, and efficient killer.”<sup>457</sup> According to George Silver, the Spaniard’s style of fighting was “perfect,” as long as the fencer was able to keep the point of the rapier directed at the attacker’s face, using minimal movement and a high degree of self-control to parry attacks.<sup>458</sup> Tybalt, however, is none of those things. Benvolio describes Tybalt as “fiery,” (I.i.107) and he certainly lives up to the name. At the Capulets’ party, Tybalt finds Romeo interloping, and immediately calls his page to “Fetch me my rapier” (I.v.54). He raves about Romeo, who comes to the party – in his mind, at least – “To flee and scorn at our solemnity” (I.v.57). Capulet finds him grumbling, which he describes as storming, (I.v.59) and goes to great lengths to order him to “be patient, take no note of him” (I.v.70). More than just trendy and ethnically foreign, Tybalt’s temperament is that of a hyper-youthful roaring boy. Capulet does not simply try to calm Tybalt; he essentially instructs the young man to grow up. As Shepard says:

Manhood was associated with moderation and constancy, since this was the stage when the body’s heat was sufficiently tempered without yet facing the threat of extinction... the passionate impulses and emotions associated with these qualities were less likely to distract men from their appropriate callings or divert their minds from the powers of reason.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Soens, “Tybalt’s Spanish Fencing,” 126.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>458</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 213.

<sup>459</sup> Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 56.

Because Capulet has to intercede in order to control Tybalt, he casts Tybalt as an uncontrolled boy, rather than a man. On the other hand, in Tybalt, we see a paradox in the period's representations of masculinity. While linking him to Spain and demonstrating him to be uncontrolled certainly locates Tybalt within English notions of "bad" behavior, his inability to hide his emotions and exhibit interiority makes him more forthright than some of the other characters. Tybalt's lack of interiority makes him a poor rapier fencer – which may be explained in part by his familial relationship to Old Capulet – but ultimately explains why he is unable to win a fair fight, even though he uses the ostensibly perfect Spanish fencing style.

The fact that Tybalt is unable to control his own dueling style only further proves Capulet right when he calls him "a princox" (I.v.85). While Tybalt is quick to fight and quick to adopt fashionable fighting styles, he does not have the self-control that was actually linked to the dour Spanish swordsmen. Soens points out that Tybalt is only able to kill Mercutio because Romeo intervenes, which gives him a stylistic advantage because the Spanish style recovers more quickly when the sword is beaten down.<sup>460</sup> The Spanish rapier style seems to be a seductive choice, given the xenophobic Silver's reticent praise and Tybalt's success against Mercutio. However, Tybalt quickly meets his match with the more disciplined Romeo.

Romeo only becomes violent in light of his friend's death (a reasonable motivation, considering), but exhibits a great deal of restraint before the duel:

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<sup>460</sup> Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing," 127.

Romeo... uttered  
With gentle breath, calm look, knees humbly bowed,  
Could not take the truce with the unruly spleen  
Of Tybalt deaf to peace... (III.i.155, 157-160)

While Romeo actually uses the Italian style,<sup>461</sup> Benvolio's recollection of the fight to the Prince emphasizes Romeo's temperament over his skill. Furthermore, he implies that Mercutio only lost the fight because of Romeo's intervention, describing Tybalt's killing lunge as "An envious thrust" (III.i.170). Tybalt's temperament aligns with the trendiness of his fighting style. He is quick to adopt foreign mannerisms, which accentuates the inconsistency of his character. Mercutio is no more self-controlled than he is, and so it makes sense that the more-interior Romeo is a better swordsman because of his capacity for self-control. Even the fact that Tybalt uses the "envious thrust" highlights a moment of successful interiority in an otherwise external fighting style. Until this point, Tybalt's Spanish style has centered around cuts, and his sword even makes noise as a result; it "hissed him in scorn" (I.i.110). Tybalt's sudden victory over Mercutio comes from a combination of Romeo's intervention, and a momentary ability to hide his interior self (the thrust, because it relies on the point of the sword, hides the interior, or blade, as per Saint-Didier's treatise).

Mercutio, meanwhile, is not as ethnically foreign as Tybalt, but in his case, Shakespeare uses a discerning choice of fencing terms in order to direct attention to the foreignness of his rapier combat. Word choice, in the various duels in *Romeo and Juliet*, is of the utmost importance. As Joan Ozark Holmer points out, Shakespeare frequently

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 121.



chooses terms such as *punto riverso*, which are only present in the Italianate treatise of Vincentio Saviolo. Shakespeare could have found English-sounding terms for the same things in the works of George Silver or Giacomo di Grassi, but instead chose Saviolo, one of the fashionable Italians against whom Silver declaims. In fact, the only time Shakespeare does borrow an Anglicized word from di Grassi in *Romeo and Juliet* is when he uses the word “time.”<sup>462</sup> By choosing explicitly Italian words, Shakespeare emphasizes the foreignness of the fencers’ fighting styles, which further sets them off from Old Capulet and his un-inherited long sword. In fact, Holmer cites the instance in which Benvolio and Mercutio playfully mock the newfangled nature of Italianate fencing terms as an example of their active attempts to adopt foreign customs. When the two are “practicing” various techniques and Mercutio refers to the “hay” (II.iv.26). Benvolio responds, “the what,” (II.iv.27) and many editors since have answered that the hay is a fencing term. It is, rather, a battle cry of sorts, and Benvolio’s confusion, according to Holmer, “underscores the relative novelty of Italian fencing language in a way that Shakespeare’s London audience would appreciate.”<sup>463</sup> As I have shown, the Italian / French styles are more-native to England than the Spanish one, primarily because of the foreign teachers who brought their methods to London. The fencing horseplay exists in the play not only as a moment of comedy, but as a signifier to the audience that the young men are affecting the foreign, Italian fashion.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Holmer, ““Draw, if you be Men’: Saviolo’s Significance for *Romeo and Juliet*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45.2 (1994) 166-167, accessed March 13, 2013.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>464</sup> It is worth remembering that the boys are, in fact, Italians, but for an English audience, watching them adopt these mannerisms would nevertheless read as a kind of degeneracy.

Another instance in which Mercutio uses Italian fencing terms serves as foreshadowing of Mercutio's death: "*Alla stoccata*"<sup>465</sup> carries it away. / Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk" (III.i.73-74). Holmer cites this example as a signal to the audience that Mercutio is about to die: "Saviolo several times warns that gentlemen should not allow themselves to be carried away by dangerous fury, the fatal passion to which all three young men-Tybalt, Mercutio, and eventually even Romeo-fall prey."<sup>466</sup> Gail Kern Paster argues that contemporary doctors saw rage as a cause of brain sickness, and that bloodletting was the medical treatment for excessive anger.<sup>467</sup> In many ways, Mercutio's loss of self-control becomes a medical condition, and by his own words, he allows himself to lose his head because of *alla stoccata* (the call to fight).<sup>468</sup> The primary difference between Mercutio's death and Othello's suicide is that Mercutio is not inwardly focused enough to carry out the bloodletting himself. As Mercutio lies on the ground, mortally wounded, he asks the page to "Go, villain, fetch a surgeon" (III.i.96). In this sense, Mercutio's death takes on the quality of a failed medical procedure – Tybalt cures Mercutio's anger by spilling his blood, but he spills too much.

Tybalt's assault leaves "a scratch. Marry, 'tis enough" (III.i.95). Mercutio knows that the surgeon cannot save him – he wants the man to tend to his corpse, not his wound. The "scratch" is a reference to Tybalt's Spanish fighting style, which favored cuts in a way that the Italian style did not.<sup>469</sup> Di Grassi, in particular, rails against edge blows

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<sup>465</sup> Holmer defines *alla stoccata* as "at the thrust" (168).

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 169-170.

<sup>467</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 97.

<sup>468</sup> This term, meaning "to the points," is where we get the modern, impatient phrase.

<sup>469</sup> Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing," 123.

because they are two slow: “But it is better not to use them, resolving rather to discharge thrust after thrust, than any edgeblow.”<sup>470</sup> From the very beginning of the play, Tybalt’s fence is demonstrably wild and unruly; he misuses the style, causing no damage without Romeo’s intervention because he is too far out of control to do any real damage: “He swung about his head and cut the winds / Who, nothing hurt withal, hissed him in scorn” (I.i.109-110). The “thrust” which Benvolio describes after the fact would create a piercing wound. That Mercutio refers to the wound as a scratch, which implies cutting, serves as an insult to Tybalt, whom he calls the “King of Cats,” (III.i.76) but also recalls the incision of a phlebotomist during the bloodletting procedure.<sup>471</sup> In this way, Tybalt becomes an unworthy surgeon, adopting behaviors over which he has little control. He has as much need for a bloodletting as Mercutio – a need Romeo eventually fulfills. Because the cut exposes the interior self (via the edge of the blade), Mercutio implies that Tybalt is uncomplex and old-fashioned, even though the thrust that actually killed him was much more direct – literally as well as metaphorically.

Furthermore, Mercutio’s use of the Italian phrase *Alla stoccata* before the fight, rather than an English alternative, is crucially significant to what happens next. As Holmer points out, this is important because Romeo conversely employs English phrasing to initiate his duel with Tybalt: “Either thou or I, or both must go with him... This shall determine that” (III.i.131,133) and later with County Paris: “Wilt thou provoke me? Have at thee, boy” (V.iii.70). Tybalt’s foreignness is well-established, but Romeo’s,

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<sup>470</sup> Di Grassi, *True Art*, G3r.

<sup>471</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 74-77.

Benvolio's, and Mercutio's ethnicities are in question. Mercutio is more Italian than the others, which makes him less English than Romeo and Benvolio, but more English than Tybalt. Mercutio knows about Tybalt's Spanish style, which situates him as similarly multicultural. "Here's my fiddlestick, here's that shall / make you dance," (III.i.47-48) he tells Tybalt. He calls his rapier a fiddlestick because Spanish fighters often trained to fight in the context of dancing to music.<sup>472</sup> Mercutio knows about Spanish rapier training, but he also mockingly dismisses it. In this way, he situates himself as less alien than his opponent, but his detailed knowledge of foreign ways (as well as his own half-foreign, half-domestic training) make him only slightly less of an outsider than Tybalt. He also suffers the stereotypical drawbacks of the non-native fighter – he is as hot-blooded as Tybalt, and his quickness to fight leads to his untimely death. His anger is equivalent to boyishness, which is in turn associated with trendiness – and by extension, foreignness. As Shepard points out, "Lust, drunkenness, *anger*, and idleness were demonized as *particular pitfalls stemming from an incapacity for self-control*, while the *vanities of flamboyant dress and swaggering gesture* betrayed a contemptuous disregard of *position*."<sup>473</sup> In this light, Mercutio is almost as bad as Tybalt, which lends credence to Silver's assertion that the "apish" ways of the continent are uncontrolled and wrongheaded. He samples foreign customs, flouts the Prince's authority, and finds himself "a grave man" (III.i.100) as a result.

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<sup>472</sup> Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing," 124-125.

<sup>473</sup> Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 26. Italics mine.

Romeo tries, but fails to live up to the standard of English ethnicity. Nathaniel Wallace insists that Romeo has a generally English identity, but not a martial one. He says that “Romeo’s discourse is primarily that of the Renaissance courtier, and he encounters difficulties when he attempts to move outside of the semiotic world of the Elizabethan sonneteer.”<sup>474</sup> Romeo attempts to fit into the English ethnic mold, but fails to do so because he tries too hard to inculcate Englishness without living up to it. For instance, he deals with fights in the traditional English way, but fails to continue the behavior when the steel starts to fly. According to Low, the duel has a very specific procedure: “A duel of honor consists of the following elements: a challenge, oral or written; a challenger; a defendant; and a combat.”<sup>475</sup> Tybalt delivers the challenge to Romeo by proclaiming that “Thou art a villain,” (III.i.60) and Romeo accepts his challenge in order to defend his own honor: “Now, Tybalt, take the ‘villain’ back again / That late thou gavest me” (III.i.127-128). Romeo follows protocol in initiating the duel, but it is too late to defend Mercutio: “[his] soul / Is but a little way above our heads” (III.i.128-129). At this point, Romeo fights not for honor, but revenge, and in following protocol at this point, he hollowly apes the righteous duel, rather than actually living the honor he insinuates. In fighting for revenge under the guise of the honor duel, Romeo follows the English dueling code in words, but not in deed. Romeo expects that simply describing the duel in righteous terms is enough, but it is not:

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<sup>474</sup> Wallace, “Cultural Tropology in *Romeo and Juliet*,” *Studies in Philology* 88.3 (1991) 336, accessed March 4, 2013.

<sup>475</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 1.

He is strongly associated with those aspects of the text that suggest that anything can become any other thing through metaphor... A primary source of dramatic terror in the play arises from the capacity for metaphors... or even casual remarks to be exchanged for reality at some point.<sup>476</sup>

Romeo follows the format of an honor duel, but not its spirit. He knows the right things to say – or, perhaps more accurately the right procedures to follow – but he does not internalize the ethos of a justified fighter in any consistent way. Romeo’s temperance before the fight, urging Tybalt to calm down, shows a manly front, and, by the period’s cultural definitions, an English<sup>477</sup> one. The English had what Jennifer Feather describes as “masculine, autonomous fortitude innate to the Britons.”<sup>478</sup> However, in the actual duel, he allows his anger to drive him forward. When County Paris assails him at Juliet’s tomb, Romeo does not recall his mistake as murder; rather, he sees losing his temper as the sin of which he is guilty:

I beseech thee, youth,  
Put not another sin upon my head  
By urging me to fury (V.iii.61-63).

In categorizing his justifications for dueling along traditional, but disingenuous lines, as well as retroactively recasting his sin not as murder but as loss of self-control, Romeo demonstrates himself to be a master of language, though not of his own behavior. Romeo shows that he recognizes the need for self-control in his fights by exercising temperance

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<sup>476</sup> Wallace, “Cultural Tropology,” 336.

<sup>477</sup> Jennifer Feather examines the difference in Romans and Britons in *Holinshed’s Chronicles* in gendered terms, and finds that the Romans are codified as feminine because of their intemperance, in contrast to a Briton masculinity which overshadows even biological sex in the form of Voadicia (87-89).

<sup>478</sup> Jennifer Feather, *Writing Combat and the Self in Early Modern English Literature: The Pen and the Sword* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 89.

before engaging, but he later retrofits his motivations as external in nature. The warning to County Paris is that he will not be held accountable for his own temper. As Low explains, “Control of language becomes the purview of the villain (who has already failed at the use of force).”<sup>479</sup> In Romeo’s case, he is skilled in the use of force, but he feels the need to justify its application, which casts him in a vaguely nefarious light. He tries to act like a moderate, self-controlled Englishman, but his ethnicity is just that – an act.

Tybalt is on the far side of this foreignness scale, completely immersed in foreign customs and alien intemperance, followed by Mercutio, who is equally intemperate, though he only *adopts* foreign customs. Romeo seems much more self-controlled, but his attempts at self-control prove hollow. On one hand, fighters like Tybalt and Mercutio , though they exercise foreign fencing customs, exhibit a Northern (read: English) forthrightness that manifests in violent, rage-fueled behavior. On the other hand, we see Romeo exhibiting self-control, an interior quality associated with Italian customs, but also a slowness to wrath that English nationalists lionized. These narratives complicate whether English audiences saw hidden intentions as good or bad. If the rapier lies between the social self and the body, then the duelists’ behavior shares one common factor – they all fail to regulate a balance between interiority and carnality. Tybalt and Mercutio are forthright, but their personalities are too hot-blooded to be sympathetic. Romeo, while more temperate on the surface, exhibits a nefarious rage hidden beneath his cool exterior.

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<sup>479</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 33.

There is one of the rapier duelists, however, who demonstrates the English virtues of the contemporary man: Benvolio. When faced with the foreign fencing terms of the Italian, “Benvolio’s bewildered response... also underscores the relative novelty of Italian fencing language.”<sup>480</sup> While Benvolio is conversant in the modern styles of fighting, he is not *fluent*, which serves as a strong distinction. He knows the jargon he needs to understand, but he has not internalized the “apish” ways of the Italians and Spaniards. Furthermore, Benvolio is quick to stop fights, rather than start them, showing a degree of self-control that is more reasonable than that of his analogues. Benvolio only draws when he wants to “but keep the peace” (I.i.66). While he is manly and willing to fight if he can save others, Benvolio insists that the firebrands like the angry Tybalt “Put up thy sword / Or manage it to part these men with me” (I.i.66-67). Benvolio is as forthright as Tybalt and company, but his actual personality is as mild as Romeo’s false exterior. Benvolio could have been, in an early modern English context, the hero of a *Romeo and Juliet* that ended in comedy, rather than tragedy. As the increasingly intemperate fighting continues to escalate, however, Benvolio becomes less and less relevant to the play; by III.i, he completely disappears. During the course of the play, he serves two functions – trying unsuccessfully to part the other duelists, and recounting the scenes of battle with a forthright honesty. He loses relevance in the story precisely because the values he represents start to take a sideline to the action. It is at this point that Shakespeare’s Verona starts to seem more Italian than English. Benvolio’s marginality in the play is a symptom of his temperance and mediation, which casts him in a wholly

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<sup>480</sup> Holmer, “Saviolo’s Significance,” 167.



positive light. Far from a cipher, Benvolio demonstrates all the virtues of a good, downright Englishman, and these virtues are systematically degraded and abandoned by the more fashionable, youthfully ignorant men. By the time the foreign, stereotypical behavior of interiority and raucousness take full hold in the play, Benvolio has no place and simply disappears without comment. By the end of the play, we are left with an Italianate sneakiness as the law of the land – one that likely contributes to the unease we feel as the families walk out of the tomb. The Prince’s admonition to the bloody-handed survivors of the brawls simultaneously dismisses the lessons everyone has learned about the proper balance between interiority and physicality even as it longs, we must deduce in vain, for better behavior in the future: “Go hence, to have no more talk of these sad things” (V.iii.307). Other tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, end with an act of exposure that brings hidden things to light. Macbeth’s head is paraded around the stage, and we learn that the corpses of the Danish court will be publicly displayed and used to teach the populace a lesson. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Prince – who has, up until the very end, proven to be an ineffective ruler – demands silence and subterfuge. The decline of Shakespeare’s Verona represents a loss of the temperance and fortitude of the past. The play’s commentary on a hidden sense of self, one that the Prince clearly has not learned, is that internalizing bad behavior is no substitution for simply being a good, forthright person from the start. The rapier creates a culture of interiority in the duel-heavy Verona, and that culture reveals itself to be unsustainable. Subterfuge reveals itself to be a failed agenda in Shakespeare’s play, and the pressure that builds up from such secrecy ultimately bursts under the pressure of its own containment.

### “Proud of Such a Daughter”: The Two Bodies of the Roaring Girl

In brawls such as those we see in *Romeo and Juliet*, fighters who fail to comport themselves properly are frequently called “unmanly.” Friar Lawrence, for instance, questions Romeo’s manhood, implying that his lack of composure is better suited to a beast. If there was a “manly” or “unmanly” way of fighting, a woman with a sword who comported herself in the “correct” way could serve as a lens through which poorly behaved men could see their personal deficiencies. In Thomas Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*, Moll Cutpurse dresses like a man, smokes like a man, and notably *fights* like a man. Laxton, the man she bests in a duel, is unable to cope with the idea of being defeated in combat at the hands of a woman, and he attempts to recast Moll’s gender as male in order to assuage his embarrassment. In doing so, Laxton plays on gender hierarchies and stereotypical assumptions about the effeminacy of Continental European males in order to ease his wounded ego at having lost the fight with Moll. Moll’s use of the rapier exemplifies the hidden truths imbricated in the weapon – by preserving her own interior from invasive men – while demonstrating that women were capable of going beyond defending themselves when it came to claiming masculine agency.

Most criticism on the play has justifiably focused on Moll’s transvestitism; after all, while it was not unheard of for women to dress as men, it was not a common behavior, and early modern society typically reserved such cross-dressing only to manifest when women needed men’s garb to do particular tasks.<sup>481</sup> When women wore

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<sup>481</sup> For example, activities that required wearing masculine doublets, such as hunting and riding, were less contentious than the most commonly-cited activity, prostitution.

masculine outfits for reasons beyond necessity, argues Jane Baston, they became dangerous figures, standing breeched in the streets as a walking challenge to the social expectations of female containment.<sup>482</sup> Marion Wynne-Davies asserts that “Mary Frith through her dress, habits, and ‘lascivious speech’ challenged moral codes.”<sup>483</sup> Jean E. Howard insists that seeing a woman dressed as a man excited erotic undertones, which were subliminally bisexual (by modern standards). Her argument depends, and insists, on the transgressive nature of Moll’s outfits.<sup>484</sup> As she explains, “The stage drew upon, produced, and reproduced more than a single sexual discourse... In *The Roaring Girl*, that resistance is complexly staged.”<sup>485</sup> Moll, however, frequently insists that she is not male; she is a woman who comports herself as a man: “Methinks you should be proud of such a daughter,” she tells Alexander, “As good a man as your son” (XI.152-153). Her behavior is manly, by the period’s standards, but she does a good job of actually acting like a man *ought* to behave. It is possible that the reason that critics can disagree on whether or not Moll’s behavior is transgressive stems from the fact that, at least in certain parts of the play, her behavior is *better* than the men she seems to emulate. In this context, Moll’s transvestitism is not only a univalent condemnation of Mary Frith’s masculine accoutrements; it also uses Moll as a way to highlight men’s weaknesses. By focusing exclusively on Moll, scholars have spent significantly less attention on Laxton,

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<sup>482</sup> Jane Baston, “Rehabilitating Moll’s Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*,” *Studies in English Literature*, 37.2 (1997) 321, accessed 16 October, 2013.

<sup>483</sup> Marion Wynne-Davies, “Orange-Women, Female Spectators, and Roaring Girls: Women and Theatre in Early Modern England,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 22. (2009) 23, accessed 1 November, 2013.

<sup>484</sup> Jean Howard, “Sex and Social Conflict: The Erotics of *The Roaring Girl*.” In *Erotic Politics*, edited by Suzan Zimmerman. 221-234, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 174-175.

<sup>485</sup> Howard, “Sex and Social Conflict,” 175.

the villain of the play, but the play suggests that Moll dresses and behaves the way she does in order to protect herself from men like Laxton. Moll can be a woman on the inside and a man on the outside because she exhibits a dualism that was in conversation with rapier play; Machiavellian subterfuge becomes a site of anxiety for the men in the play who insist that Moll's outside should match her interior, but for Moll herself, it provides an extra layer of protection from invasive men.<sup>486</sup> What the rapier shows us is that, perhaps the question of whether or not Moll is "transgressive" is the wrong litmus test to apply to the play. Pulling back from Moll to include the lecherous men in the play offers the possibility that our critical discussions might pay off more fruitfully if we examine the way that Moll's non-traditional dress interacts with the traditional, but toxic, masculinity enacted by the men who surround her. Moll is imbricated within a culture of violence that has complex, contradictory implications for gendered behavior.

From the earliest scenes of the play, Laxton spends considerable effort recasting Moll's ethnicity as that of a Continental European. Referencing the Dutch and Italians allows Laxton to recast Moll as an effeminate man, rather than a mighty woman. He regularly describes her with ethnically-charged insults. When the men stand around, speaking of her lustily, Laxton insists that "Such a Moll were a marrowbone before / an Italian: he would cry bona-roba till his ribs were / nothing but bone" (III.199-201). Laxton here calls to mind the supposed intemperance of Italian men, and describes Moll

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<sup>486</sup> A similar kind of anxiety plays out in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which Orlando, commenting on Rosalind/Ganymede's swoon, suggest that she lacks a manly heart. Her coy response, "I do so, I confess it... A body would think this was well / counterfeited" (IV.iii.164-166) echoes this insistence upon aligning the interior and exterior. William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: As You Like It* (London: Thompson Learning, 2007).

as a snack. While this example redefines Moll as the food of the Italian, not the Italian himself, it does associate her with foreignness, if obliquely. The comparison is hardly unintentional; Laxton hopes to garner sex from Moll, and choosing the Italian is telling. A. J. Hoenslaars explains the stereotype against Venetians: “Pride, lechery, and vengefulness were attributed to its inhabitants, although it needs to be emphasized that such vices were attributed to other Italians as well, both in travelers’ accounts and in the drama.”<sup>487</sup> Moll directly references this ethnic stereotype later in the play, when she asks Lord Noland:

If some Italian pander there would tell  
All the close tricks of courtesans, would not you  
Hearken to such a fellow? (X.347-349)

To emphasize her point, she specifically sets her hypothetical brothel in Venice (X.346). When Laxton imagines that Moll is an Italian woman, he plays on the stereotype for sexual voracity, but in this later moment, Moll acknowledges the stereotype directly, while emphasizing the “close”-ness of Italians: the sexual encounter with such a person is possible because they are capable of preserving secrets. Machiavellian interiority becomes a way to enact evil aims even when the person casting judgment is lionizing those activities. Laxton further reinforces this foreign description several lines later, when he jokes that “She slips from one company to another like a fat eel between a Dutchman’s fingers” (III.214). Again, he uses the comparison to an ethnically charged meal to sexualize Moll’s interiority. These two situations are the beginning of Laxton’s attempt to

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<sup>487</sup> A.J. Hoenslaars, *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), 170.

reconfigure Moll as a foreign male, rather than a powerful woman. The dualism of feminine virtue is endemic in early modern plays, as well. Tim, a character in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheap-Side*, directly describes this renaming practice: "I perceive that a woman may be honest according to / the English print, when she is a whore in the Latin" (V.iv.113-114). By attempting to control the definitions of Moll's interiority, Laxton hopes to gain control of her.

When the duel finally happens, Laxton's attempts to recast Moll's social self, allowing him to categorize her as an effete, foreign male. Playing on her clothes and his earlier assertions of her non-Englishness, he redefines her in a way that allows him to recover the honor he loses in the duel. Most directly, when Moll prepares to fight Laxton, she drops her cloak and draws. Laxton replies, "What, wilt thou untruss a point, Moll" (V.61). While Laxton hopes she will take off her clothes, this makes another reference to Rocco Bonetti, the famous Italian fencer. Bonetti, demonstrating his pride in the Italian fencing technique, assured opponents that he could remove the buttons from any English fencer's clothing.<sup>488</sup> Even as he prepares to duel with a woman, Laxton portrays himself (unwittingly or otherwise) as falling under the long shadow of [male] foreign fencing masters, rather than as the opponent of a powerful, competent woman. "Self-identity," Lloyd Kermode says, "is determined by its reaction to the other, and specifically on its difference to the other."<sup>489</sup> Laxton's reaction to Moll, then, shows an attempt to cushion the blow that having a female conqueror would deliver to his sense of pride.

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<sup>488</sup> Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing, 123.

<sup>489</sup> Lloyd Edward Kermode, *Aliens and Englishness in Elizabethan Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

The focus of rapier combat on interiority never fully allows Laxton to mitigate the damage to his honor by using Moll's clothes as evidence of masculinity. Laxton uses the breeches as evidence that Moll is biologically male, but Moll insists that she is a woman performing masculinity – an insistence that depends upon the division between the body and the self. Given the evident pun on his name – “Lacks stone” – Laxton experiences an anxiety about his own gender performance – one that is challenged by losing a fight to a woman. He hopes that he can police his own secrets by characterizing Moll's interiority as unnatural, thereby negating her biological sex and situating her gender entirely on her outfit. Losing to a woman would provide a second castration of sorts, and would unveil his hidden secret – that he lacks stones. Meanwhile, his ethnic stereotypes bring to mind the men of the continent, for whom Englishmen harbored little respect. Not only were the French and Italians not considered to be overly masculine, but their fighting techniques were persistently catalogued as dainty by comparison to more “manly” English fighting methods. Vincentio Saviolo directly associates the use of rapiers with the continent, and considers duels to be the height of European civilization's system of honor. He explains that “Many combats [were] fought in the kingdom of Naples between French-men and Italians for their country, whereunto were required and chosen most famous and skillful men both of the French and Italian nation.”<sup>490</sup> George Silver's commentary on the rapier becomes relevant here, as well. His conflation of “Italian, French, and Spanish fencers”<sup>491</sup> as bearers of disease is a useful slippage to return to as we discuss Moll.

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<sup>490</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, 2.

<sup>491</sup> Silver, *Master of Defence*, 203.

Silver's categorization of the rapier as the harbinger of "ague" and "vices" is important because it implies a corruption of the English nation. As Jonathan Gil Harris explains, "archaic religious discourses of diabolical pathogenesis frequently informed the innovative, exogenous images of the English body politic's figurative and actual illnesses."<sup>492</sup> This attitude established the foreign customs (like rapier dueling, in Silver's mind) as symptoms of a malfeasant state. "Vices" is important to us because it ascribes a direct correlation between such a moral declension and the use of these weapons. Moll's refusal to be the same person on the outside and the inside, in as much as it allows her to remain gender fluid, becomes a disease in Laxton's eyes, just as the supposed trickery of rapier fencers seemed deceitful to the weapons' detractors. Even Joseph Swetnam, who spends pages of his combat manual praising the virtues of the rapier and dagger combination, sees the weapon as worthy of study precisely because of its capacity for deceit: "I will speak more in commendations of the rapier and dagger, note it well, for it is the finest and the comeliest weapon that was ever used in England, for so much cunning to this weapon belongeth as to no weapon the like."<sup>493</sup> The idea that the weapon was one of cunning is directly referenced in *The Roaring Girl*, no less. Sebastian describes his relationship with his father as a fencing bout, and relies directly on the perception of the rapier as dishonest: "How finely, like a fencer, my father / fetches his by-blows to hit me; but if I beat you not / at your own weapon of subtlety" (II.112-114).

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<sup>492</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 142.

<sup>493</sup> Joseph Swetnam, *EEBO Editions: The School of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defense* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2010), 2.



Saviolo further explains that the rapier, like deceit, can hurt the defender as easily as the opponent: “the Rapier is that which sheweth who are men of arms and of honor, and which obtaineth right for those who are wronged: and for this reason it is made with two edges and one point.”<sup>494</sup> The sword is capable of cutting in both directions; I need not elaborate on the traditional literary narrative of double-edged swords. What I would like to note, however, is that the rapier’s ability to work to the user’s benefit and detriment equally demonstrates that the sword in-hand can serve as an indicator of the user’s integrity. A good person will use the sword for protection and castigation, while a bad person will use it to empower or defend bad behavior. Dissonance between the inner and outer self becomes a characteristic that is not univalently derided; sometimes it can serve good ends, as it does with characters such as Hamlet, Henry V, and Hieronimo, but it is the same characteristic that defines early modern drama’s most successful villains, from Richard III to Iago.

This discourse plays out directly in *The Roaring Girl*. While Moll insists that she is a woman, she reinforces Laxton’s opinion of her by playing the part of a man when she fights. As Jennifer Low points out, when Laxton appeals to her mercy (an attribute typically associated with femininity), Moll refuses to spare him. She only accepts Laxton’s surrender on the same terms as a man. “When Laxton begs for his life,” she explains, “taking Moll as seriously as a man, she treats him according to the code between gentlemen.”<sup>495</sup> Moll, indeed, takes on the role of a self-controlled man: “I scorn

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<sup>494</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, 7.

<sup>495</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 156.

to strike thee basely” (V.123). This sentiment was commonplace during the period; Swetnam instructs the victor of a duel to “be not hasty in thy wrath, but pause although thy weapon be drawn, for the thrust being given, and the blow once fallen, it will be too late to repent.”<sup>496</sup> Furthermore, the righteousness of combat – and, by extension, the identity of the warrior – is directly related to the way in which the fighter actualizes it.<sup>497</sup> It is not, in short, enough to fight skillfully – one must fight honorably. While the craven Laxton appeals to Moll’s preferred gender identification when she spares him – “Spoke like a noble girl, i’faith!” (V.124) – his subsequent aside reveals his shame at having lost the fight to a woman: “Heart, I think I fight with a familiar, or the ghost of a fencer” (V.125-126). Laxton is utterly incapable of admitting to himself that a woman has bested him; he falls into flights of fancy, imagining that she must be a witch, if not possessed. In short, Moll teaches Laxton to recognize the complex interplay between her biological sex and her fluid gender performances. Part of the reason he has so much trouble reconciling Moll’s gender identity with his loss in combat is that Moll, possessed of a sword, threatens the permeability of his own body. Paster demonstrates that the classical idea of the body, still in use during the Renaissance, held that the body was porous and capable of penetration. Piercing the skin constituted an invasion of the self – a kind of conquest.<sup>498</sup> Moll is capable of preserving her agency and her personal expectations of her social self by using male clothes as a protective layer. The rapier is the perfect sword of choice because it helps preserve the solidity of the outer body while relying on the

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<sup>496</sup> Swetnam, *Paradoxes*, 3.

<sup>497</sup> Feather, *The Pen and the Sword*, 83.

<sup>498</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 14-15.

interiority Moll already exercises on a daily basis. The importance for this scene is that Laxton comes to the field in hopes of a tryst, only to find Moll prepared for a different kind of physical interaction. While Laxton has plans to physically penetrate Moll, Moll defends herself by means of a weapon traditionally associated with a very different type of penetration.

In this context, Moll serves as the protector of her own chastity, a role traditionally reserved for men. Her chastising speech indicates that she is engaging in an honor duel in her own defense:

...What durst move you, sir,  
To think me whorish? A name which I'd tear out  
From the high German's throat if it lay ledger there  
To dispatch privy slanders against me! (V.88-91)

By taking her chastity into her own hands, Moll claims agency for her virtue. This has been her stance throughout the play, incidentally. She has expected something of this sort since Scene 3, evinced by her question to Trapdoor:

But say your mistress should receive  
injury: have you the spirit of fighting in you – durst you  
second her? (III.386-388)

It is not simply Moll's clothing that makes her an agent for her own ends; it is her willingness to defend the limitations of her own body, independent of a man. Margo Hendricks likewise attempts to deemphasize Moll's clothing choices, and finds that it is Moll's agency regarding her sexuality (specifically, for Hendricks, her disavowal of

marriage) that makes her dangerous in early modern society: “The representation of Moll Cutpurse, therefore, can best be explored not by addressing the question of whether women crossdressed or not, but by seeking to comprehend what may have lead [sic.] some women to shun what... was the single most important responsibility of a woman, marriage.”<sup>499</sup> While scholars such as Baston and Hendricks have argued that Moll is rehabilitated to society’s norms, these moments of combat make perhaps the strongest case for her resistance to conformity. I would, however, agree that she does reinforce society’s expectations of female chastity; she simply goes against those same expectations by protecting her chastity herself. According to Feather, “the purpose of combat is to produce a victor whose power, in fact his very agency, lies in defeating his opponent.”<sup>500</sup> Of course, in objectifying Laxton, Moll enacts more than a clean subversion of the patriarchy. She lays claim on the patriarchy itself, using it to her own ends. Recognizing the expectations placed on her body by society, Moll refuses to actually take the killing blow, but the effect of this decision seems to be the worse of her two options. By exposing the permeability of Laxton’s fencing ward, Moll places Laxton in the vulnerable position society usually reserved for women, and the result, as I have shown, leaves him sputtering for some way to rationalize his defeat at the hands of a woman.

Not only does Moll put Laxton in his place, she defeats him in combat as a warning for the other men of London. Her impassioned accusation of Laxton – which she

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<sup>499</sup> Margo Hendricks, “A Painter’s Eye,” 18.2 (1990) 193, accessed 1 November, 2013.  
Jane Baston, “Rehabilitating Moll’s Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*,” *Studies in English Literature*, 37.2 (1997) 321, accessed 16 October, 2013.

<sup>500</sup> Feather, *The Pen and the Sword*, 3.

wishes could carry on to all men – urges London’s men to reconsider their constant pursuit of women:

...Would the spirits  
Of all my slanderers were clasped in thine,  
That I might vex an army at one time. (V.113-115)

Moll draws her proverbial line in the sand by drawing Laxton’s blood in a minor wound:

She’s wounded me gallantly...  
I would the coach were here now to  
carry me to the surgeon’s. (V.126, 130-131)

While Laxton rails as though he might die, he walks out on his own volition. No one needs to carry him to the surgeon because Moll already has symbolically calmed down his lecherous heat. As Paster explains, “More crucially... men and women routinely underwent phlebotomy, as noted, in order to rid themselves of excess blood their bodies could not turn into nutriment or to remedy one of many conditions.”<sup>501</sup> By denying his rights to interiority, Moll defends her own chastity through an enforced bloodletting – and Laxton directly mentions that he has quite a bit of excess fluid: “Here’s blood would have served me this seven year in broken heads and cut / fingers, and it now runs out all together” (V.128-129). Moll does not fit the passive role usually ascribed to women in the period; she is the “roaring” girl because she is always ready to fight, as evinced in the following exchange with Sebastian:

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<sup>501</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 79.

Sebastian: I'll offer no worse play.  
Moll: ...Nay, and you should, sir,  
I should draw and prove the quicker man! (VIII.72-74)

Typically, the “roaring *boys*” of the period were aggressive only because they had no temperance. Saviolo, for instance, declaims against their failure to exhibit proper composure: “This manner of proceeding and behavior doth plainly show that these men (although peradventure they have learned the use of the weapon) have not been sufficiently instructed in the Art of Arms.”<sup>502</sup> The Art of Arms is the understanding of proper comportment in battle, and Saviolo delineates a difference between those who fight with aggression and rage versus those who behave calmly and temperately: “also must I tell you that men’s fashions are diverse, for some set upon their enemies in running, and there are others which assail them with rage and fury after the fashion of Rams, and both these sorts of men for the most part are slain and come to misfortune.”<sup>503</sup> As we can see, the usual reception of “roaring” was to judge the noisemaker as intemperate. In Moll, however, the gruff, noisy exterior helps her to defend a self-contained inner woman.

While her loudness and aggression may read as uncontrolled, her inner self is chaste in a way that is hyper-controlled. In this, we see a different side of the rapier’s capacity for cunning. The weapon facilitates intemperance in those who are prone to it, but the moralism of the rapier is present because such intemperate behavior brings one to ruin. The capacity for deceit and intemperance would certainly suggest, according to

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<sup>502</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, B2.

<sup>503</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, 7.

Saviolo's theories, that a fighter would lose any rapier duel in which he or she engaged. One might expect such intemperance and deceit from Moll "Cutpurse." Moll, however, expresses a different demeanor altogether; she is aggressive, but only in defense of her own honor. For instance, when Moll spies "*a fellow with a long rapier by his side,*" (III.252.5) she publicly beards him. "You remember, slave, how you abused me t'other / night in a tavern," (III.258-259) she exclaims, "you have tricks to / save your oaths, reservations have you, and I have / reserved somewhat for you. [*Strikes him*]" (III.261-263). While it is impossible to know if the situation that Moll describes is real, or part of her "tough act" for Laxton's benefit, the kinetic language of violence gives us some insight into why the scene exists. The long rapier, which is typically about four or five feet long, is even more capable of penetrating an opponent's guard than the typical sword. As Swetnam colorfully puts it, "for in a word a short sword and dagger to encounter against a skillful man with [long] rapier and dagger, I hold it a little better than a tobacco-pipe or a fox-tail."<sup>504</sup> In the context of the play, this scene is important when one reads the visual rhetoric of the swords. Moll, by approaching the man, shows that she is capable of taking all comers, even when they have the mechanical advantage. Just as Moll overcomes Laxton, penetrating his ward and disgracing him, she demonstrates an equal willingness to the better-endowed gallant who seems to have offered her some previous, but similar, offense. The difference between what Moll does as a "roaring girl" and the behavior of the "roaring boys" of the period is that Moll aggressively defends her honor, which shows her to be a well-adjusted member of society (even though her dress

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<sup>504</sup> Swetnam, *Paradoxes*, 173.

and demeanor exist undoubtedly outside of societal norms). The roaring boys, conversely, lose honor through their intemperance. This difference is exceptional, because it shows that loudness and openness could be a good thing for a woman, as long as it served the higher goal of preserving her chastity (i.e. containment).

The question, then, remains as to whether Moll's successful honor duel situates her as transgressive or conservative of early modern English values. It is my sense that Moll participates in a lesser-of-two-evils behavior by taking up the sword to defend her honor. *Hic Mulier*, a tract railing against the mannish women of the day, criticizes the exact kind of deportment for which Moll is famous. "You have taken the monstrousness of deformity in apparel, exchanging the modest attire... to the cloudy ruffianly [clothes of a man]." <sup>505</sup> The writer even describes the armed women who exchange: "for needles, swords." <sup>506</sup> Even so, the tract offers an alternative, and the alternative exhibits parallels to Middleton's representation of Moll's behavior in the fight scene. The anonymous writer of *Hic Mulier* suggests that the way to combat the "monstrous" behavior of the mannish women is to be excessively chaste: "Are all women then turned masculine? No, God forbid, there are a world full of holy thoughts, modest carriage, and severe chastity." <sup>507</sup> While no one would accuse Moll of "holy thoughts" and "modest carriage," her bladed defense of her own virtue could certainly fit the description of "severe chastity." Like Moll, the virtuous women of the writer's praises are "armed with the infinite power of

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<sup>505</sup> Anon., *Hic Mulier*. London: Eliot's Court Press, 1610.  
<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/home>, A5-A6.

<sup>506</sup> Anon., *Hic Mulier*, A6.

<sup>507</sup> Anon., *Hic Mulier*, A3.



virtue, are castles impregnable... and invincible armies.”<sup>508</sup> As the earlier quote no doubt illuminates, the imagery of the chaste woman as a protector of her virtue through martial might conflicts with the writer’s assertion that such women should not exchange needles for swords; however, the corollary is that someone, ostensibly a man, is helping her defend her chastity.

Moll’s situation, in which she is surrounded by lecherous men, is not soluble from without; what Middleton dramatizes in *The Roaring Girl* is a woman who sacrifices modest clothing and comportment without in order to preserve the purity and virtue within. Her castle, to use the pamphleteer’s term, is composed of her clothing and body; she retreats within to protect her social self. The uxuriousness of the men around her requires Moll to perform masculinity – the response pamphlet, *Haec Vir*, insists that the only thing that will allow women to return to the raiments of “true women” is men who will be “men in counsel, men in show.”<sup>509</sup> Low provides the clearest insight into how this works in combat. In the literature of the period, men fight each other to punish insults. Women, conversely, fight in order to teach a lesson to the opponent. “Unlike early modern male duelists,” she explains, “these female characters approach the duel as a possibility for rehabilitation rather than as an opportunity for punishment.”<sup>510</sup> Low spends little time discussing *The Roaring Girl*, perhaps because Moll only uncomfortably fits this description. While she does not kill Laxton, which would be a just punishment for his attempted ravishment – “I scorn to strike thee basely” (V.123) – she does re-

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<sup>508</sup> Anon., *Hic Mulier*, A4.

<sup>509</sup> Anon., *Haec Vir*, London: J. T., 1620. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.libproxy.uncg.edu/home>, C3r.

<sup>510</sup> Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 140.

castrate him by defeating him in the combat, as I have demonstrated. The punishment takes on the desired didactic function, though, and Moll wishes that the lesson would translate to the other men of London (V.113-115). This scene is so complicated because Moll is aggressively chaste, which fits with society's mores, but she is simultaneously lascivious in her quasi-sexual domination of the men who attempt to compromise her sexual purity. The answer to this particularly tangled puzzle lies not in Moll at all, but in Laxton's guilty reaction to her.

Laxton immediately begins sexualizing Moll upon seeing her, and his lechery is actualized physically in the form of his missing testicle. Losing the fight to a woman, Laxton becomes even less than the half-man he was before. His lecherous behavior has always covered up his sexual impotence up to this point, but Moll's victory exposes the truth about his faltering virility. Moll serves as a mirror in which the sexually eager Laxton has to face his own shortcomings, and it is this honest introspection which Laxton cannot achieve. When he rationalizes that he loses because "Heart, I think I fight with a familiar, or the ghost of a fencer," (V.125-126) it is because he has to struggle with the dissonance between his self-concept as a man and the reality of his loss at Moll's hands. Throughout the play, Laxton uses women to reinforce his own faux-virility; of Mrs. Gallipot, he notes "for what I take from her, I spend upon other wenches, bear her in hand still" (III.93-95). When Mrs. Gallipot's money cannot buy him Moll's chastity, the system by which Laxton actualizes his self-worth crumbles around him, and shows him that he is less of a man than even the breeched woman who towers over his bleeding form. Rather than accept this, however, Laxton turns to ethnic stereotypes for reprieve. If

Moll is an effete male from the Continent, Laxton still loses stature when he loses the duel. He does not, however, lose his carefully crafted image of a sexually domineering male. While Continental men were seen as less virtuous than Englishmen, their vaguely sub-human status does not prevent them from being capable fighters. For instance, when George Silver describes the Spanish fighting style, he approaches the Spanish fencer with a combination of condescension and awe. He describes their movements “as if they were in a dance,” but he grudgingly admits that, if the Spanish style is properly executed, “it shall be impossible for his adversary to hurt him.”<sup>511</sup> The mixture of condescension and respect with which Englishmen approached the duelists of the continent allows Laxton the perfect space in which to nurse his wounds and defray some of the pain Moll causes him in his defeat.

Looking at Laxton’s behavior informs our understanding of Moll’s transvestitism and combativeness. I believe that most scholarship on the play, in focusing on Moll’s nontraditional clothing, has been unable to decide whether her behavior is transgressive/radical or not precisely because it has hyper-focused on Moll, to the exclusion of the other characters in the play. It is at this point that Kermode’s assertion about self-identity becomes relevant again, and so I repeat it: “Self-identity is determined by its reaction to the other, and specifically on its difference to the other.”<sup>512</sup> I believe that one reason scholars have had trouble deciding whether or not Moll is radical is that they have overlooked the “reaction to the other” which Kermode interprets as the

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<sup>511</sup> Silver, *Paradoxes*, 14.

<sup>512</sup> Kermode, *Images of Englishmen*, 7.

quintessential factor in categorization. Because Laxton cannot reconcile his personal interiority (hiding his secret about his damaged genitals) with Moll's (sheltering her social self within a masculine shell), and ultimately because he loses his interior agency when the duel reveals the truth about his incomplete masculinity, he seeks to distance himself from Moll by redefining her interiority as a detestable foreign custom. While the ethnic stereotypes on which Laxton relies for this redefinition were commonly accepted beliefs during the period, the audience could have seen Laxton's use of these stereotypes as an attempt to lick his wounds nonetheless.

Coming back to Moll, then, one still has to question where she is transgressive at all. The answer, frustratingly, is both "yes" and "no." Yes, Moll is transgressive, because she subverts the period's strict sumptuary laws and gender normativity, as many scholars focusing on Moll's masculine raiment have demonstrated. I am unable to read her as completely transgressive, however, because she does all this to protect herself from the lascivious attention of Laxton, the play's real troublemaker. Moll is simultaneously insistent that she is a woman and "As good a man" (XI.153) as many of the males in the play. In *The Roaring Girl*, the ends (the preservation of chastity) justify the means (taking up a sword, dressing like a man). Many scholars have noted that Moll's single status at the end of the play serves as a sign that she has subverted the usual social order.<sup>513</sup> Moll does, however, facilitate a marriage between Sebastian and Mary, and while there is some indication that she never expects to marry – her assertion that "marriage is but a chopping and a changing, / where a maid loses one head, and has a worse one i'th' / place" (IV.45-

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<sup>513</sup> Baston, "Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion," 328.

47) comes to mind – there is also no reason to interpret this as an anti-marriage stance *per se*. Most of the men in the play truly do seem to be a worse head than that which Moll already possesses. In addition, given that the most important thing a woman can bring to marriage during the period is her virtue, Moll's defense of her purity could be read as a marriageable virtue, even if it never leads her to marriage. In this case, it really does not matter; whether she intends to marry or not, her choice to fight is motivated by her hopes of maintaining her sexual purity, and the interiority required of rapier combat allows her to enact this violent chastity. Moll responds to the others' criticism of her clothing with an assertion of her own agency:

...But howe'er  
Thou and that baser world censure my life...  
I scorn to prostitute myself to a man,  
I that can prostitute a man to me. (V.106-107, 111-112)

When one views the play through the kinetic language of violence, the lesson at work appears to be that men who attempt to encourage sexual deviance in normally virtuous women force those women to adopt extreme behaviors, sometimes even socially unacceptable behaviors,<sup>514</sup> in order to defend themselves. It is Laxton's behavior (and that of the gallant with the long rapier, though this event is not staged) that is figured as truly abnormal in the play. Laxton's inability to internalize Moll's femininity gives voice to his failure to learn from the experience. Faced with his own inadequacy, Laxton resists the horror by denying it. Meanwhile, Moll's transvestitism is certainly unorthodox, but

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<sup>514</sup> Jane Baston, for instance, points out that prostitutes often dressed in similar outfits to that which Moll wears in order to facilitate easy access to their bodies (Baston 322).

she situates herself as a virtuous, if unruly, maid. Lecherously assailed on all sides, Moll's use of manly clothing is only practical; the world of the play is overrun with predatory men, and Moll has to wear appropriate clothing to wall them off. I do not mean to imply that fighting is the only reason Moll dresses as a man. Through the lens I have established here, however, Moll's transvestitism is justified by the culture of the play's London, and her chastity is upheld through a separation of the social self and the carnal body that is enabled by the traditions of rapier dueling.

To recall my assertions in Chapter *Seconde* about the differences between feminine and masculine agency – we might conclude that Moll is using her hidden sense of self as a form of masculine agency in defense of the impermeable, masculine body. In this sense, the sword shows us not only that gender is not linked to biological sex – the rapier enables a kind of resexing of the body based on ingress/egress models. Moll insists upon her womanhood, but her body, primarily because access to its insides is restricted from invasive men, seems functionally to be sexed as masculine. Moll is a “better man” than the men in the play because she is more contained than them, a distinction that generally factors as a dissonance between biological sex and gender, but in this case, comes dangerously close to re-engaging sex. Moll uses the interiority afforded by the rapier to push her feminine side so far into her interior (and, by extension, her social self) that her clothes function more like her skin. Her sword completely divests her social self from her body. To remember the valences of the ballock dagger as a plug that shores up the ingress to a masculine form of embodiment is to conceive of biological masculinity as divorced from the possession of a penis – masculinity becomes in this sense defined by

solidness. Because Moll is impermeable (both because she refuses to take off her clothes and because she refuses to be pierced with a sword), she can with certainty claim to be the best man in the city while unremittingly upholding feminine qualities such as chastity.

“Turn it to a Crutch”: The Fecund Arm and Disability in *The Little French Lawyer*<sup>515</sup>

In the way that characters such as Moll and Othello intentionally rely on the division between the body and the social self to enact certain forms of agency in their respective plays, we also find evidence that characters come to ruin when they fail to recognize the importance of the hidden sense of self that the rapier enables. My final example turns to Beaumont and Fletcher’s obscure play, *The Little French Lawyer*, in which we see Champernell, a one-armed, one-legged fencer, failing to divide his selfhood (socially disabled) from his body (physically impaired as a result of his amputated limbs), and being disgraced as a result. The central incident of the play hinges on a rapier duel, sparked by Champernell’s marriage. The main character, Dinant, is chafing after Lamira marries the disabled soldier, Champernell, instead of him. To get his revenge, Dinant disrupts the wedding party and publicly shames Champernell. The family responds to Dinant’s impertinence by going to the lists. When Dinant’s second, Cleremont, fails to meet at the appointed time, Dinant is forced to yield or fight two men simultaneously – only to be saved at the last instant by Monsieur La-Writ (the eponymous little French Lawyer). The disruption of the wedding and the public shaming that Champernell endures during the play’s induction highlight the way that the sword works as a fecund

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<sup>515</sup> Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, Volume IX (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

arm in the hands of a person who is both impaired and disabled. Because the disabled person is expected to rely on internal honor (their bodily impairment is thought to preclude defending their honor physically), the sword facilitates the same division between exterior and interior, but does so by staying in its sheath.

If the fecund arm, as I argued in Chapter Prime, extends the abilities of the user beyond the normative limits of the body, then people whose bodies do not meet the normative standards may experience a highlighted, socialized disability even with the fecund arm in tow. Unlike Richard, whose disabilities are social (and, in the context of the play, imaginary), Champernell is impaired and disabled, as he has lost both an arm and a leg in naval combat. He expresses that:

I got these, not as you do your diseases,  
In brothels, or with riotous abuse  
Of wine in taverns; I have one leg shot,  
One arm disabled, and am honor'd more,  
By losing them. (I.i.272-276)

Champernell locates his honor in the missing limbs, and situates his loss as different from “dishonorable” wounds earned through whoring and brawling. When affronted, however, we find that Champernell’s honor is entirely internal; the affront incites him to challenge the young men, but his missing leg and arm make it impossible for him to engage in the duel. Rather than satisfying himself with internal honor through an act of stoicism, Champernell attempts to rise from his chair and fight the gallants.



Champernell's family attempts to help him to his feet, but he rejects the offer:

I alone must right myself  
And with one leg, transport me, to correct  
These scandalous praters." (I.i.268-270)

As he attempts to rise, Champernell falls to the stage and begins to weep. He fails both to "right" himself in the sense of rising from the chair and to "right" himself in the sense of revenging himself against his detractors. The scoffing Dinant instructs him to "Put up your sword," (I.i.282) and Claremont adds "or turn it to a crutch, there't may be useful" (I.i.283). As I argued in Chapter Prime, the sword does not serve the function of a prosthetic limb, and never is that assertion more difficult to maintain than in this moment, when two men instruct a one-armed, one-legged man to use the sword for that exact function. To think about the mechanics of such an action, however, is to realize that the comment is not an expectation that Champernell should carry the sword as a crutch at all. Rapier blades were too flexible and too light to carry the weight of a man in this manner. Even the much-heavier longsword that Capulet calls for in *Romeo and Juliet* is not a good crutch; his wife instructs him to get a crutch *instead* of the sword. The comment is actually a mean-spirited joke on Claremont's part. When swordsmen committed suicide, they placed the hilt on the ground, the point in their pectoral region (roughly the same location as a crutch), and fell on it. By suggesting that Champernell lean on his sword for support, Claremont is functionally telling him to go kill himself. We can recognize this valence of the line in the syntax of those that follow. They tell him to relate to his wife "what a brave man you were once," (I.i.285) commending her on her kindness in

“giv[ing] an old man pap” (I.i.287). They then offer an alternative option, in which he retires to her home and hires a surgeon to teach her how to wrap and treat his wounds – and to endure the smell of healing poultices.

Because Champernell has drawn his honor from his bodily prowess for so many years, he only understands how to earn honor through physical means. As he exclaims:

...All powerful heaven,  
Restore me, but one hour, that strength again,  
That I had once, to chastise in these men,  
Their follies... (I.i.295-298)

He functionally disables himself by limiting his options for revenge to physical prowess. By redefining his honor as external, he eliminates the possibility for revenge, unless he receives the help of his nephews. When Claremont suggests that Champernell go kill himself, he is mechanically suggesting that the old man insert his sword (the emblem of his honorable behavior) inside as well. Because his body is unable to use the sword for combat, and thereby defend his own wounded honor, his enemy reasons that it would serve him better on the inside, where his honor remains intact.

We can see the nature of the fecund arm in a new light because of this scene. In Beaumont and Fletcher’s play, unlike in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, the sword is limited in its ability to extend the body’s capabilities if the body itself is unable to conform to normative standards. Champernell attempts to draw his sword and fight, but ultimately fails because of his impairments. As his enemies stand over him, mocking his wounds, we see the limitations of Low’s “honor natural” are relative to the limitations of the body. This narrative insists upon the body as a container for, and a limit to, interiority. We

might be tempted to empathize with Champernell in the scene; however, it is clear from the context of the play that the audience was expected to take a similarly cruel joy in Champernell's misfortunes. His own family, including his newly wedded wife, chides him for crying in front of his attackers: "Shed tears upon / Your wedding day? This is unmanly Gentleman" (I.i.293). Given that the play opens with a philosophical discussion of the merits of Stoicism (in which Dinant and Claremont reject the philosophy altogether), we can interpret this over-reach of emotion as an example of Champernell's insistence on exteriority, despite the need for him to withdraw within himself. His attempts to use the sword in a fight are yet one more example of his insistence on a physically derived honor – and both his friends and enemies insist that he would be better served to derive honor from within.

Despite the socialized limitations of his missing leg and arm, Champernell's choice of the rapier is a poor one because of his inability to exercise self-control (necessary to the proper wielding of a rapier). Joseph Swetnam argues that the duelist's best defense is simply not to fight: "let patience be thy buckler, and a fair tongue thy sword, and always have a care in the beginning what will be the end... Oh, thrice happy were that man, which towards the latter end of his days, can without a pair of lying lips say, 'I never bare malice.'"<sup>516</sup> When Champernell keeps the sword at his side, it serves as an accessory to his internal honor, bourn proudly after a life spent in service to the navy. The honor of the gallants, who he insists have never "seen / The horror of a Sea-fight," (I.i.241-242) is carried externally in their roaring. As they put it, public shaming is a

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<sup>516</sup> Swetnam, *The School*, 42.

victory to them as much as Champernell's valiance at sea: "We ha' the better of him, / We ha' made him cry" (I.i.300-301). The incongruities between Champernell's internal honor and the embodied honor of the gallants, which depends upon agonistic competition rather than the ability to bear hardship patiently, result in Champernell's disgrace. As with Old Capulet's inability to play by the new rules of the roaring boys in *Romeo and Juliet*, Champernell's service, which won him wounds in the war, now limits his ability to participate in peacetime brawls – and in the economy of manhood to which they subscribe. The function of Champernell's fecund arm is similar to that of Richard's, but by extending his innate honor into the exterior world, the sword exposes that honor to ridicule, socially eradicating it. Because his body is not able to enact the honor duel necessary for this outward show of worthiness, attempting to engage in it anyway undermines Champernell's performance of Stoicism even as it highlights his impairments and restructures them from sources of honor to socialized disabilities. Had Champernell chosen to bear calmly the scorn of his enemies, his internal honor would have remained intact, but because he attempts to thrust his self-worth into the physical realm, he is found wanting.

What this scene teaches us is that the rapier's unique ability to arbitrate the line between interior and exterior becomes reconfigured as a burden when it is placed in the hands of someone who cannot wield it with skill. The kinetic language of violence is used in this context to demonstrate the unworthiness of a person, passing ableist judgment on Champernell because he is not satisfied with internal, Stoical honor. The unkindness of the gallants becomes justified within their own sense of masculinity because they are able

to overcome the line between his interior and exterior by bringing him to tears and dropping him on the floor, and we see in this the blurry lines between violence and language formation. For most of the examples I have discussed in this project, we see the sword being used as a means of communication – the very premise of my phrase “the kinetic language of violence.” However, we see here the functions of a sword being carried out through words: the real duel never takes place with swords because Dinant and Claremont are able to assert their dominance over Champernell through lurid descriptions of his wounds and the implication that Lamira will be unsatisfied on her wedding night because “this leg, this arm, / And there is something else, I will not name” (I.i.263-264) lack the strength to physically please her. When Champernell tries to draw and fight, he fails because of his wounds, but the real loss comes from having lost his self-control in the fits of his anger. Because Champernell tries to locate his honor in a realm that he cannot occupy competitively, the fecund arm works in the wrong direction; a sword at his side would exacerbate his Stoical, longsuffering qualities, but a sword drawn extends Champernell’s honor into his limbs, where he is at a disadvantage. If the honor won in a duel comes from penetrating the ward of the body, piercing the castle wall and exposing the interior, then the “winner” is he or she who preserves that protective layer. Dinant and Claremont win the battle against Champernell by forcing him to come out from behind his walls through the act of drawing the sword. There does not need to be a battle, because Champernell’s loss of containment (and the crying that exemplifies it) is an exposure of his insides – and therefore the goal of the duel is already achieved. If, as Saviolo points out, the two edges of the sword can both wound the

duelist's enemies and the duelist himself,<sup>517</sup> then the fecund arm's ability to extend the social self into the physical world can be simultaneously powerful as a statement of agency and dangerous as an articulation of selfhood. The difference between a villain like Richard and a character like Champernell seems to be at least partially related to how the sword is employed as a fecund arm. When the fecund arm is used to extend the social self into the corporeal world, it becomes a powerful object of conquest, but when a person's strength relies upon temperately keeping his or her honor within, a drawn sword becomes ineffective. In Champernell's case, the sword draws his body out of line with normative structures, and in doing so, it ceases to function as a fecund arm and returns to the realm of prosthetics.

### Conclusion

The preponderance of rapiers in early modern England produced in the English a sense of anxiety because the weapons, though plentiful on the island, were strongly associated with Continental Europe. The subterfuge required to wield the weapon properly resonated with English notions of Italianate deception, and this lack of forthrightness on the part of the fencer smacked of dishonor. Whereas the medieval knight was invested in exposing the truth within the context of trial by combat, the rapier emphasized skill and training over faith in God's righteous intervention. The arrival of a new figure further troubled this dissonance, as the rise of the rapier brought about the rise of the "pugil," or *bravi* in Italian. The pugil was a skilled fencer who could replace the

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<sup>517</sup> Saviolo, *His Practice*, D2.

actual litigants in the honor duel for the right price.<sup>518</sup> If honor and/or justice could be purchased, it was neither inherent to the fencer (honor natural) nor received from the family. In this context, the notion that the duel revealed hidden truths became vexed to a point that it eventually was extinguished altogether. In its place rose the idea that the fencer, who was already well skilled in hiding his intentions, used the weapon to cloud the unity between the body and the social self.

Therefore, deception became the staple of the rapier in particular, though this division between intention and action was not universally seen as a negative. Stoicism, one of the rising Neo-Classical philosophies at work during the period, required a sense of interiority that negated the forthrightness of a standardized English masculine comportment. After all, one of the most marginalized groups in the period, women, were chided for their inability to contain words, fluids, and sexuality, even though they were similarly derided for a presupposed dishonesty. Because of this beleaguered notion, women were weighted by a difficult expectation: chastity required that women unify their internal thoughts with their external actions by “purifying” and perfecting the person on the inside before projecting that purity out into the world around them. The division between the social self (in the period conflated with the Christian soul) and the body allowed for deception, but like the rapier itself, could be used for good or evil purposes. This delicacy of purpose conflicted with the directness ascribed to males in the High Middle Ages, but meshed rather well with older, Roman ideals. We see both narratives under negotiation in the period; Hamlet, for instance, experiences the world feelingly and

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<sup>518</sup> Turner and Soper, *Elizabethan Swordplay*, 2.

with an indirectness that emphasizes his own interiority and has encouraged scholars to investigate his psychological state. Julius Caesar, on the other hand, operates under a system of honor that requires him to meet his problems head-on, consequences be damned, in a way that might seem like an exterior-focused version of masculinity. On the other side of the coin, however, Caesar is consistently recast in a negative light when one focuses on his inability to contain himself, and is ultimately feminized by the wounds he receives at the hands of his aggressors.<sup>519</sup> Hamlet, likewise, shares all of his interior thoughts with the audience in a way that places him in a more-confessional position than many other inwardly-focused characters such as Aaron the Moor and Iago, who refuse to articulate their confessions. The rapier's popularity as a weapon that was capable of both concealing and revealing the unspoken truths at work within a person's soul coincided with a period in time during which anxieties surrounding self-control (at its best) or subterfuge (at its worst) came to a head.

This is not to say that the division between the inner and outer person was an early modern construct by any means. The place of the sword, in terms of embodiment, had always been closely linked to truthfulness, and the need for the sword to arbitrate truth and honor was the very premise of the medieval trial by combat. The need to expose truth is inextricably linked to the notion that truth can be hidden. The difference here relates to the sword's renegotiated position in early modern society. Because the sword was leaving the battlefield, and because it was finding its way into the hands of wealthy merchants and constables, it became impossible for the aristocracy to maintain the

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<sup>519</sup> Paster. *The Body Embarrassed*, 104.



monopoly on honor and truthfulness. In *Titus Andronicus*, we hear the classist notion that dueling results in people being “basely slain in brawls” (I.i.358).<sup>520</sup> The notion that someone could lose an honor duel “basely” suggests that class divisions were no longer as solid, and the need for an outward show of nobility became replaced with internal honor – the philosophical underpinning of Stoicism. In this sense, the rapier is unique among swords because its contribution to the kinetic language of violence is that, rather than bridging the gap between the internal and the external, it places a wall between them – not to put too fine a point on it, but a “fence.” As the traditional means by which the aristocracy came to differentiate itself from the lower classes started to disappear and become appropriated by the non-aristocrats, the need to locate honor externally became supplanted by the need to carry it within. The rapier happened to be the best tool to merge the warrior ethos with the early modern sense of personal exceptionalism because it enabled a particular version of the divided self.

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<sup>520</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus*, (London: Methuen Drama, 1995).

## CHAPTER VI

### THE SULFUR AT THE END OF THE DAY

Contrary to popular belief, the gun did not directly contribute to the slow burn that was the fall of the sword. Though the early modern period very clearly saw the removal of the sword from its original preeminence in combat, early modern firearms were not the ruthlessly lethal weapons we know today. In fact, the breastplates sold by the period's armorers came with a dimple that indicated the armor had been "proven" by firing a pistol or arquebus at point-blank range. The buyer would check for this indicator that the breastplate was "Arquebus-proof."<sup>521</sup> This nomenclature remains today when we speak of bullet-proof vests. In addition to being unable to overcome the aristocratic swordsman's armor without a wide volley of shot, the guns of the early modern period were the most expensive weapons on the battlefield, making them wildly inefficient. As J. R. Hale has explained, "For governments, firearms sharply increased the costs of war... Gunpowder weapons and their services may have added a third to the costs of a campaign."<sup>522</sup> These costs were proudly incurred by Europe's ruling classes, who saw it as an opportunity to flaunt their wealth, though the real cost fell upon the common people, who suffered under increasing taxes associated with the costs of gunpowder and growing armies (keeping a firearm-equipped army required more personnel), in addition

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<sup>521</sup> Thomas F. Arnold, *The Renaissance at War* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 109.

<sup>522</sup> J.R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450-1620* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 46-47.

to rising food costs directly associated with the period's recruitment practices.<sup>523</sup> We see a tension in records of gun usage in the period; for instance, when Claudius commands that every time Hamlet earns a hit in his duel with Laertes, "all the battlements their ordinance fire," (V.ii.247)<sup>524</sup> we must understand his wasteful use of cannon as another symptom of Claudius' tyranny. Even with all this, the gun still suffered further drawbacks. Firing the gun at all incurred an incredibly long loading time, to the point that faster-loading longbows continued to see preferential use in the British Isles as late as the waning years of the sixteenth century.<sup>525</sup> During the reloading period, a gunner was vulnerable to attack. Adding to this loading time was the fact that the gun itself lost its honing every time it was fired. Hale explains that "thanks to the slew of the carriage on recoil, no shot could be fired without realignment."<sup>526</sup> The longer range of attack and the psychological impact of firearms made them formidable weapons, but even the fact that they required less training than bows or crossbows gave them a reputation for being unnatural. Hale elaborates that "on a few occasions this led to captured handgunners being treated with especial cruelty."<sup>527</sup> In short, our sense that the gun naturally supplanted the sword is a product of blurry hindsight; the gun was unable to take its present prominence on its own terms.

Similarly, I mentioned previously that pikes were the staple of early modern armies, but the pike, as a replacement for earlier bills and spears, was equally unable to

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>524</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2006).

<sup>525</sup> Arnold, *The Renaissance at War*, 92.

<sup>526</sup> Hale, *War and Society*, 50.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid., 95.

supplant the sword on early modern battlefields. In fact, only the best-aimed blow of the horse-driven lance could expect to pierce early modern armor.<sup>528</sup> In addition, the long range of the pike was outmatched by the zweihänder, preferred sword of the *Landskechte* mercenaries that occupied a majority of European armies in the period.<sup>529</sup> The benefits of the lance's long range were outmatched by similarly large swords like the zweihänder, and completely undone by swordsmen who were too close to be threatened by the pike's head, meaning that the weapon's advantages had more to do with its usual targets – lightly-armored soldiers from the working class and the momentum-laden horses of the aristocracy. For this reason, the pike was effective, but not against the aristocratic swordsmen who were equipped against them. Only by combining pikes with artillery could either weapon be tactically effective.<sup>530</sup>

The rise of the gun, and by extension, the fall of the sword, precipitated from the humblest of places. Just as one had jumped out of hiding and taken the French King Henry III by surprise in 1589, it was a French dagger that killed the sword. Specifically, military minds from Bayonne, France recognized the tactical application of placing a dagger in the barrel of a gun after it was discharged in hopes of making the weapon into a spear (the tactic was first used by hunters to defend against angry, but not-yet-dead, boars). These daggers are called “plug” bayonets. The main drawback of harquebuses and muskets was that once they discharged, the weapon was an unwieldy club until it was

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<sup>528</sup> Arnold, *The Renaissance at War*, 109.

<sup>529</sup> Harvey J.S. Withers and Tobias Capwell, *The Complete Illustrated History of Knives, Swords, Spears & Daggers* (China: Hermes House, 2013), 287.

<sup>530</sup> William Barrieffe, *Military Discipline, or, The Young Artilleryman* (London: Thomas Harper, 1635), 27. Spelling modernized.

reloaded and its aim was readjusted. The plug bayonet gave the weapon the benefits of a pike while it was unable to serve the function of the gun, eliminating the drawbacks of each while bestowing the benefits of both.<sup>531</sup> This meant that armies no longer had to defend gunners with specially trained pikers: rather than a multiple-man team of specialists, the entire formation could be gunners without incurring the close-range danger that resulted from holding an unloaded firearm. Sometime between 1660 and the end of the seventeenth century, military scientists developed the ring-based bayonet, which latched onto the side of the barrel and eliminated the need to add or remove the dagger from the opening. By the eighteenth century, all of Europe's armies were using the bayoneted gun as their main infantry weapon.<sup>532</sup> While the sword remained on the sides of aristocratic cavalry officers and members of the navy, the transition from slowly-taught sword techniques to efficient group fire had been effected.

This was the point at which the kinetic language of violence began to turn into a foreign tongue. Rapiers would evolve into the smallsword (a tiny weapon with no cutting edge) and eventually be relegated to fencing-as-sport by the nineteenth century. Sabres persisted in cavalry units, but were mostly used from horseback, limiting the range of attack to a few slashes (though sabres also saw use in a second branch of sport fencing). Hunting swords like the falchion became novelty items as they were supplanted by guns. While daggers do persist as bayonets to the present day, the dagger as a hand weapon has been replaced by modern tactical knives. The intense training necessary to master a

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<sup>531</sup> Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armor* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 234.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

sword became an inefficient use of one's time as armies transitioned to firearms, which could be learned much later in life. While the sword maintained a place of privilege in our romanticized notions of chivalry, because of the bayonet, its disappearance from the battlefield presaged its eventual disappearance from everyday life.

The need to train in sword combat techniques naturally disappeared with the need to practice them. It is for this reason that our modern understanding of the kinetic language of violence has become hazy. For Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, terms like “slip,” “stocatta,” and “mandritti” were as common as our use of technological terms such as “google” and “stream.” The immediate recognition of the maneuvers used for various weapons – and, indeed, the intrinsic valences ascribed to the weapons themselves – was tied to a certain understanding of the relationship between the social self and the physical body. Firearms, unlike bladed weapons (and staves, for that matter – though I do not cover those weapons here) occupied a different relationship to the body because they did not direct the relatively acrobatic movements of the swordsman as a sword did. The gun became more directly involved in a kind of invisible combat – one that, by the nature of being invisible, is also illegible.<sup>533</sup>

The illegibility and mysticism that the gun brought to violence connected it to a new way of understanding human bodily interactions. Dave Grossman points out, for

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<sup>533</sup> Stephen Greenblatt has demonstrated that early modern English folk imagined the disconnect between the deaths of Native Americans and the germs that Europeans brought to them as a validating factor in European colonialism. This disconnect was described by at least one English writer, Thomas Harriot, as “invisible bullets.” The ability to obfuscate the causes and effects of power allowed power to become less conversational than mystical. Stephen Grenblatt, “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*” in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000*, ed. Russ McDonald (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 441.

instance, that the extra distance afforded by guns, coupled with the group-fire that made the killer's identity hard to determine, enabled killing to ascend to an industrial scale.<sup>534</sup> While the sword remained a weapon of arbitration between two parties, guns were interested in the mathematical destruction of human life. Swords were responsible for death and impairment to be sure, but the impersonal nature of guns removed the cause (the gunner) from the effect (the victim). Because of this haziness, the conversational nature of combat was lost. The divestment of the word from the act of combat came at the cost of the weapon's relationship to the body as well. Phrases like "It is the prince of Wales threatens thee, who never promiseth but he means to pay" (V.iv.41-42)<sup>535</sup> become the connective tissue between word and deed when the sword is involved, but slaughter of a firing line does not prove the worth of the gunners except in the collectivist aggregate. In fact, the phrase "rank and file" comes from the military's newly organized formations. A "rank," according to the harquebus tactician William Barriffe, is "a row of men, sometimes more, sometimes fewer, standing, moving, or marching even abreast," while a "file" is "a sequence of men, standing one behind another, back to belly in a straight line standing front to rear."<sup>536</sup> The anonymity associated with a "rank and file" person owes its etymology to the intentionally-anonymous nature of firearm formations in the period. William Barriffe's tactical manual, which teaches how to arrange pikers and artillery into useful formations, spends only ten pages explaining the bodily customs of both gunners and pikers, while the rest of the manual involves moving and firing in

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<sup>534</sup> Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Black Bay Books, 2009), 193.

<sup>535</sup> Shakespeare, William. *King Henry IV Part 1* (London: Thompson, 2006).

<sup>536</sup> Barriffe, *Military Discipline*, 12.

formation. The fact that sword manuals deal almost exclusively with posture and the relationship between the swordsman and the opponent is very telling; the relationship between the gun and the soldier is not a bodily one, and the relationship between the soldier and the enemy is not a discursive one.

To discover the kinetic language of violence is to *recover* a particular code of communication that rose to prominence because weapons such as swords occupied an embattled position during a specific place and time. Medieval texts show a similar use of the kinetic language of violence, but the early modern period's infidelity to the sword's historical prominence in society meant that the aristocratic class, locating its self-identity in the sword, expressed an anxiety about the weapon's displacement. The lettered folk in early modern England engaged with this anxiety through the kinetic language of violence, and so the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras were the height and pride of this particular form of communication – and also its downfall. Because bladed and staved weapons engaged with both embodiment and conversation, we can learn much by studying the fissures between the social self and the constructed physical body – fissures occupied by the fecund arm of the sword. Taking away the sword has removed the fecund arm, and so the use of guns in combat marked an ironically silent period in writings about combat regarding human engagement of embodied selfhood. People became numbers and formations because numbers and formations were necessary to employ guns properly in the field. The need to standardize embodiment is a connected issue; to operate as a group of matching pieces, the bodies of soldiers must *be* matching pieces. Similarly, “honor” could not be proven on the body, as with a sword duel, because the cause-and-effect



relationship between the soldier and the act of carnage performed upon the victim were divested into two separate camps. Numerically organizing companies of soldiers was an effect of capitalism, as Hale and others have shown, and the transition to guns was a primarily capitalist venture. Because honor became entirely internalized, the need to “prove” honor (as in a duel) became archaic. In the place of the fecund arm arose the fire arm, and rather than reconstructing the body as the sword did, the gun divested the connection between word and deed, enabling higher death tolls at the cost of individual advancement.

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